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# Book Review: "Gandhi and His Jewish Friends"

Harold Coward

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translations of the puranic and epic texts in a German work is also to be regretted.

Anand Nayak  
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

***Gandhi and His Jewish Friends.*** Margaret Chatterjee. London: Macmillan, 1992, xiv + 182 pp.

**ALTHOUGH** THERE IS little reference to Judaism in Gandhi's *Collected Works*, Margaret Chatterjee demonstrates that Gandhi had many Jewish friends and that they were an important influence on his life and thought. As such this volume is a useful addition to her earlier *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (Macmillan, 1983). It also brings attention to a formative influence in Gandhi's thought that has not previously been examined.

While in South Africa, Gandhi sought to enlist European help in his fight for the cause of immigrant Indians. Chatterjee shows that most of Gandhi's close friends and supporters during his South African period were Jewish. As Gandhi himself put it, "In South Africa, I was surrounded by Jews" (p.105). She suggests that their willingness to assist Gandhi was because they knew well from their own experiences the injustices immigrants experience. Equally important, suggests Chatterjee, was the fact that many of them were theosophists rather than observant Jews, and Theosophy also attracted Gandhi during his South Africa period. They participated with Gandhi in his early experiments with community economic life on the 100-acre Phoenix Settlement outside of Durban - inspired by the reading of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. They also gave Gandhi a London-Johannesburg link to mobilize support for the Indian cause in South Africa. At the Phoenix Settlement many of Gandhi's ashram ideas are prefigured: co-educational schooling, emphasis on manual labour, opposition to industrialization, *ahimsa*, and the practice of *brahmacharya*. Chatterjee observes, "*Hind Swaraj* was yet to be

written. But much of it was surely in Gandhi's mind during those early days at Phoenix" (p.65).

Christian influence also came to Gandhi's community experiments via Tolstoy. With the help of his Jewish friend Kallenbach, 1100 acres was purchased and a Tolstoy Farm established where *satyagrahi* families could lead a religious life (p.79). Different religions lived together with men and women housed separately and the women referred to as "sisters" which, suggests Chatterjee, was arrived at by Gandhi's combining of "the Gujarati custom of adding the word 'behn' (sister) to the names of women and the name for those who have taken vows in Christian convents". The difficult spartan life at Phoenix and the Tolstoy Farm evolved in Gandhi's mind as a training ground for *satyagrahis* who would be effective soldiers of non-violence. Thus the Jewish-supported South African experiments in community living pioneered Gandhi's prerequisite requirements for engaging in effective political activity (p.87). It was here that Gandhi's ideas of a community founded on truth, chastity, poverty, tolerance, and physical labour were hammered out.

In discussing Gandhi's interaction with Judaism during the World War II years, Chatterjee's research turns up interesting findings. Chatterjee convincingly shows that in spite of having ample evidence regarding the fate of the Jews in Germany, Gandhi was unable to understand the Jewish fear of annihilation in the face of Hitler's program of genocide. Chatterjee's strong conclusion is that in this situation, Gandhi was guilty of "moral blindness" (p.119). His flaw was his

failure to recognize radical evil. Just as the traveller whose sights are set on distant heights is most likely to fall into a chasm, so Gandhi, with his fixed focus on non-violence, adopted a simplistic view of violence – one that lumped together uncritically colonialism, warfare, and all forms of human inhumanity. This led him, says Chatterjee, “to preach the efficacy of non-violence in a host of situations of which his own experience had left him quite ignorant” (p.119).

Of particular interest to Christian readers is Chatterjee’s chapter entitled “Prophets and Horizons”, in which she examines Gandhi’s correspondence with Martin Buber and where she concludes that Gandhi shares characteristics with the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition. Like Buber, Gandhi is drawn away from otherworldly mysticism, whether it be the esoteric realms of the Kabbala or the Theosophists’ desire to ascend the levels of consciousness. Although Gandhi and Buber never met, nor reached any meeting of minds in their correspondence, Chatterjee concludes that there is common ground between Buber’s “prophetic spirit” and Gandhi’s “prophetic politics”. It is found in concern for the conditions of the least privileged members of society. But Buber remains critical of Gandhi’s attempt to bring religion fully into

politics. Although Gandhi held for rigorous self-criticism, he was not always sensitive to the need for a prophetic critique of all politics, all nationalisms. Gandhi had double standards for judging Jewish and Arab nationalisms, and within India, supported Indian nationalism while denying Indian Muslim nationalism. Although Chatterjee agrees with Nehru who suggested that there was something prophetic about Gandhi’s ideas and his style of putting them across, she critically observes that at times “the white light of vision blinds the perceiver” (p.158). Thus Gandhi’s close equation of politics and religion falls short of Buber’s full prophetic critique.

This is a thoughtful, stimulating book which brings to the fore fresh insights regarding Gandhi’s strengths and limitations. Margaret Chatterjee is to be thanked for further deepening our understanding of Jewish and Christian influences on Gandhi and the prophetic critique of him. Although it contains some overlong detours into Theosophy and Kibbutzim, *Gandhi and His Jewish Friends* is a fine piece of original scholarship which no Gandhi collection should be without.

Harold Coward  
University of Victoria

### ***The Divine Matrix: Creativity as Link Between East and West.***

Joseph A. Bracken, S.J. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995, xi+179 pp.

**CREATIVITY, DIVINE ENERGY, the Infinite as act and not entity – *The Divine Matrix* uses these categories to explain what religion is all about, how philosophical categories are best used in comparative work, and on what basis interreligious understanding can best proceed. Bracken wants to give us basic insights into religious traditions, and ultimately “to determine the nature of the Infinite that is thus revealed in**

all the finite persons and things of this world...” (p.129). Though rooted in Bracken’s own Christian theological and philosophical training, the book’s goal is ecumenical: not “to indicate the superiority of one view of the Divine over the other, but rather to indicate that they are inseparable dimensions of one and the same august mystery” (p.137).

To further this ambitious project,