Dr. Benny Kraut's Book Is Published

By Jonathan D. Sarna

Benny Kraut, "From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler." An I. Edward Kiev Library Foundation Book. Hebrew Union College Press, 1979, 285 pp. $16.50.

"He comes as near to being a saint as it is possible for a human being to do. He is so good that a great many people regard him as eccentric....You could hardly believe me if I were to repeat to you all the bad names he has been called. Crank, hypocrite, pharisee, infidel—everything his enemies could think of that was untrue and insulting. He stands between two fires. The Christians despise him as worse than a Jew, and the Jew rate him as an apostate."

Allegedly, this is a description of one Raphael Grickel, a minor character in novelist Henry Harland's "Grandison Mather" (1889). In fact, the man so characterized was none other than Harland's personal hero: Felix Adler (1851-1933).

Adler is a sadly neglected figure in American History. As the founder of the Ethical Culture Society, and an active social reformer, he deserves better.

Any list of American Social Gospel thinkers should rank him near the top. He contributed to the movement which rejected the deterministic philosophy of Social Darwinism, and insisted instead that man could create a better, highly ethical future. His influence on American religion was both indomitably powerful and durably permanent.

In his new book, "From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler," Dr. Benny Kraut, associate professor and director of the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Cincinnati has traced the religious development of Felix Adler.

He first carries Adler from his New York youth and student days—his preparation for the rabbinate—to his graduate training in Germany.

There, in 1872, Adler broke with the Reform Judaism of his father, Rabbi Samuel Adler of Temple EmanuEl in New York, and devised for himself an eclectic religion "combining the rejection of theism with a redefinition of the purpose of religion in terms of social reform."

From Germany, Adler returned to New York, but he had to find a new calling: his ideas hardly suited him for a rabbinical career.

He taught for a time at Cornell University, thereby becoming one of the first Jewish professors of Hebrew at an American university.

His controversial religious ideas, however, soon got him into trouble; he did not receive tenure. Finally, on Feb. 21, 1877, friends organized for him the New York Society for Ethical Culture. It became "Dr. Adler's society"—and his life's work.

Dr. Kraut traces the early years of Ethical Culture in America. He reveals the forces that shaped Adler's thought, and places Adler's religious doubts within a broader framework of American and European religious history. He demonstrates how Ethical Culture challenged Reform Judaism by meeting needs and grappling with issues which the temples ignored.

In a shift of focus, Dr. Kraut then presents the Jewish reaction to Adler. One of the community's brightest young lights—a future leader—had left the fold. Most Jews were shocked. A few thought that reason would prevail, and Adler would return. Several hundred went to hear about Ethical Culture, and stayed to join up. The majority of Jews, however, disassociated themselves from Adler, and ignored him altogether—or so they claimed at the time.

Felix Adler's influence nevertheless looms large in American Jewish life. Later Reform rabbis, imbued with a depth of social consciousness barely known in earlier days, freely admitted that Adler was really their mentor—in ethics if not in religion.

"I turned to him for guidance, for spiritual guidance and for moral help," Rabbi Stephen Wise admitted after Adler died. Wise viewed Adler as the "one prophetic Jewish voice" in New York City.

In his later years, Adler frequently denied that he was a Jew. Various Jewish leaders, eager to distance themselves from atheistic universalism, gleefully publicized these denials, and hoped that non-Jewish Americans would believe them. They didn't; especially since they continued to hear Adler speak out on matters of Jewish interest.

Anti-Semitism became a subject of critical concern to Adler; he also deeply lamented the growth of Zionism. When he spoke on either subject, his voice, to non-Jewish ears, was the voice of a Jew—indeed, the Jew par excellence. Adler's universalism, like that of so many of his co-religionists, proved at root to be just another form of Jewish particularism.

"From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture," is not a full-scale biography of Felix Adler. Dr. Kraut does generously tempt the reader with a delicious taste of Adler's richly productive final decades. But the full sumptuous banquet will have to come from another book. This volume focuses on Adler's emergence.

"From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture," is also not a psychological study. Adler's upbringing, his ties to his siblings, and his uneasy relationship with a father whom he loved and respected but strove to outshine hint at unresolved tensions that may explain curious aspects of Adler's later career.

But not being a psychohistorian, Dr. Kraut leaves the hints for others to explore. One hopes that they will take up the challenge.

By his own admission, Dr. Kraut has not written the last word on Felix Adler. He has, however, certainly pointed scholars in the right direction. Future biographers of Felix Adler will stand on the shoulders of a giant.

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