**Dr. Benny Kraut's Book Is Published**

By Jonathan D. Sarna


"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 Jews rate him as an apostate."

Allegedly, this is a description of one Raphael Grickel, a minor character in novelist Henry Harland's, "Grandison Mathe" (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 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 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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