

## BOOK REVIEW

*History, Religion, and Spiritual Democracy: Essays in Honor of Joseph L. Blau*, Edited by MAURICE WOHLGELERNTER (New York: Columbia University, 1980).

Reviewed by  
Shalom Carmy

The recipient of this *festschrift* has made his reputation as a distinguished teacher of philosophy and religion at Columbia University and as a writer on social philosophy and sociology of religion. His colleagues and students have presented him with a volume containing four sections, representing his areas of concern: religion; American philosophy; Judaism; and social philosophy. The editor, Maurice Wohlgernter, has been a highly influential teacher of English at Yeshiva College, and is now Professor of English at Baruch College of C.U.N.Y. He has published well-received biographies of the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill and the Irish master of the short story, Frank O'Connor.

Wohlgernter's background is relevant because he takes it upon himself to introduce this volume with a lengthy account of Blau's life and thought. Affectionately he brings before the reader Blau's father, an idealistic immigrant who became a Reform Rabbi and whose son was not to receive the intense and early Jewish education that had been the father's in Europe; the diligent student who was the only religion major at Columbia in his year; the scandal of that oft-acknowledged corruption which clings to certain academic institutions like a characteristic odor ("a deadly combination of ruthless ambition and sheer, malevolent, sadistic pleasure . . . an extraordinary amount of time and energy that might best be used by mind-ing one's own affairs or [horrible

thought!] serving the students"); the healthy rhythms of inspired teaching and writing; the rarely acknowledged sadness that comes, for the committed teacher, with the anticipation of retirement, the need to be reminded that one's "splendid accomplishments have not been 'washed away by the waves of time.'"

When an individual like Blau, whose spiritual affinities lie somewhere in the neighborhood of Ethical Culture, gets an Orthodox Jewish biographer like Wohlgernter, the encounter, however respectful, cannot be uncritical. Blau is a libertarian in his conception of the role of religion in society and a naturalist in metaphysics. To sociology he has contributed the term "voluntaryism;" in a democratic society, denominational affiliations are indeed voluntary and, for Blau, it is good that such associations remain open rather than binding and permanent. "It is good, too," writes Blau, "for Judaism that in other than religious matters there should be a recognizable difference between Jews and non-Jews. There must, after all, be Jews if Judaism is to be America's 'third faith.'" But there is no transcendent reason to resist the homogenizing impact of American society; besides, in Blau's own words, the "distinction between morality and religion is today unimportant and virtually nonexistent." However correct all this may be as an appraisal of the dominant mood in the American Jewish culture a generation or two ago, such a

situation is, as Wohlgeleinter points out, inherently unstable. Moreover, this analysis of Judaism leads Blau, along with other historians of Jewish thought, to ignore the perennial halakhic backbone of Jewish existence.

As a naturalist, Blau is comfortable with theological categories only to the extent that these represent the projection of human values and aspirations. God becomes "God," an emblem for man's belief in the future (see the important quote p. xxxviii). Given his stress on the openness of the future, he must dismiss the traditional conception of a "determinate" traditional God, who performs once-and-for-all acts of creation in history and ordains specific religious institutions. Indeed, he must optimistically affirm the future *qua* future, without assurance of its determinate nature: "we must learn to think in terms of the unity of a common human future. Of this common human future, the indeterminate God can be a symbol. We know *that* it must be; we cannot know *what* it must be, for it will be shaped by events that have not yet occurred." Basing himself on the evidence of traditional Jewish sources, Wohlgeleinter insists that belief in creation and revelation need not deny genuine creativity in the present and the future. He argues even more persuasively that unblinking confidence, and hence acceptance, of the future, whatever it may be, leaves man unable to confront, in its true enormity, the world of the Holocaust, and in general undermines man's capacity to recognize the mysterious dimensions of reality.

The realities of human nature and history have also called into question Blau's rejection of institutional religion. The sixties brought to the universities and the streets a generation of young people who indeed lived in the future and without a determinate ontological sense of their past. Blau came to understand man's uprootedness as the "central phenomenon of the spirit in the modern world." Blau responds by seeking a place

for "a dynamic, centrifugal spirit housed and made welcome within a conservative, centripetal priestly institution." (This approach is interestingly similar to the conservative ideology recently advocated by Garry Wills with regard to *political* activity, and derived, according to Wills, from Augustine's doctrine of the Two Cities.) It is a virtue of Wohlgeleinter's critique that he recognizes the inadequacy of Blau's retreat: a compromise correction which tempers the ideal of total openness with the stolid stability of the past will not suffice. What is required is a transvaluation for which a creative future is substantially rooted in in a determinate past. As Wohlgeleinter puts it: "Such an institution [as Blau has described] cannot be other than one which houses a determinate God of tradition." The awareness that faith in the future *must* relate itself to a faith in the past, and that both are shipwrecked without the religious dimension, plays an important role in the troubled musings which govern Robert Nisbet's recent *History of the Idea of Progress*. Nisbet's attempt to recover for contemporary Western culture the belief in hope that Blau's generation took for granted, (an attempt which, like Wills' political philosophy, seeks the approbation of Augustine's ghost) is symptomatic of the present breakdown to which Wohlgeleinter points.

Wohlgeleinter's role as biographer occasionally blunts his philosophical critique of Blau; he tends to react to Blau's ideas instead of fully presenting his own. On pages xxxviii-xxxix, for example, he would have done well to free himself from Blau's vocabulary (in particular, he should have replaced Blau's term *deist* by *theist*, the latter of which would better have described Wohlgeleinter's own position). His success as an intellectual biographer, conveying a sense of excitement to the story of a philosophical environment whose heyday is past, needs no such qualification.

Of the four sections of scholarly

essays, the first two return us to that faraway world, dealing with the history of American philosophy and the conflict between supernaturalism and naturalism; the last section concerns society and education. Readers interested in Judaica will turn to the third section which contains a new item for the Neusner bibliography (an attack on the prevalent

scholarly view maintaining an early dating for Mishnah Tamid); an attempt by David Blumenthal to clarify a "combinatorial" passage in *Sefer Yetsirah* utilizing a computer; and Edith Wyschogrod's discussion of Buber's conception of No-Self, notable for her analysis of Buber's treatment of Buddhism and Nietzsche.

---

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE

RABBI SHALOM CARMY is the Executive Editor of *Tradition*.