


2008

Cantor's "Quakers, Jews and Science: Religious Responses to Modernity and the Sciences in Britain" - Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Watts, Ruth (2008) "Cantor's "Quakers, Jews and Science: Religious Responses to Modernity and the Sciences in Britain" - Book Review," *Quaker Studies*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies/vol12/iss2/8>

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BOOK REVIEWS

CANTOR, Geoffrey, *Quakers, Jews and Science: Religious Responses to Modernity and the Sciences in Britain, 1650–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 432. ISBN 0-19-927668-4, Hardback, £56.

The primary question addressed in this well-researched, informative book is how specific religious communities engaged in and with science, the latter being defined broadly as the physical and biological sciences, together with geology, anthropology and mathematics. The specific communities investigated are the Quakers and Jews in Britain, particularly England, from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries. The author is eager to show that any depth of understanding of this can only come from careful contextual underpinning, a point that he fully exemplifies throughout his text. The reader is made very aware not only of the contrast of the Quaker and Jewish communities with other religious groups in England, especially Anglicans, but also is helped to see the complex and changing differences there were within these communities themselves. How to define a Quaker or a Jew is explored cautiously and a brief history of both communities in England is given. Careful attention is given to issues of time and space and location and how these affected variations in the groups and their reactions to science. Class differences within both communities are also shown to be significant and the almost complete absence of women is noted, but not discussed in any depth.

Although clear divergences become apparent in the way Quakers and Jews viewed and connected with science, it is shown that there were also similarities, not least because both communities were dissenters from the established form of religion. More than that they were outsiders: Quakers because their form of Christianity marked them as separate from others of their religion; Jews because they had long been the 'other' for most Christians. Such issues of identity and distinctiveness are demonstrated to be crucial in understanding the two groups in all their activities, science being an important aspect of this. This was especially so because science was one area where (especially if you were socially affluent and you were male), people of varying religious persuasions could come together on equal terms.

In tackling his basic question, the author explores the educational institutions set up or favoured by Quakers and Jews and what scientific education they were likely to receive in them. Excluded from any institutions which enforced subscription to

Anglicanism, they were drawn by inclination or circumstance to those which were more modern, secular and scientific. Quakers also set up schools with 'useful' and often scientific subjects. Quakers and Jews are shown to have participated in differing ways in scientific societies and activities, but what becomes absorbing is the way their different conceptions of religion affected which sciences they were drawn to and how far they engaged with them. For example, the Quakers' emphasis on the 'Inner Light' is convincingly shown to have led them to emphasise empirical science while the Jews urgent concern for correct timing of rituals led them to expand their astronomical and mathematical knowledge. Quakers were also much drawn towards botany as 'innocent leisure' and leading them to God while Jews long studied science for medicine.

Increasingly in the nineteenth century science was viewed as a central component of modernism and Cantor's arguments are particularly interesting and persuasive as he details how his chosen groups dealt with this. The Quakers response to the challenge of Darwinism, for instance, was much influenced by the particular religious position taken by different individuals at a time when Quakerism itself was undergoing decline and schism. By the 1880s it was the growing number of moderate, liberal Quakers who interpreted the Bible historically and as progressive revelation, who found evolutionary theory the easiest to accept. Jews had seemed to endorse Darwinism more readily, especially as some believed that Judaism was more compatible with evolving science as it was less dogmatic and superstitious than Christianity. In following modern science, Jews could both portray themselves as staying within the traditions of their religion and as being intellectually equal to Christians. Not all Jews agreed with such arguments, however, and Cantor's analysis of the arguments in this, as throughout the book, gives a fascinating picture of the interactions and interrelations of science and religion in a way that has been rarely explored. For the nuances and varying facets of this intriguing history, the reader is advised to read the book.

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