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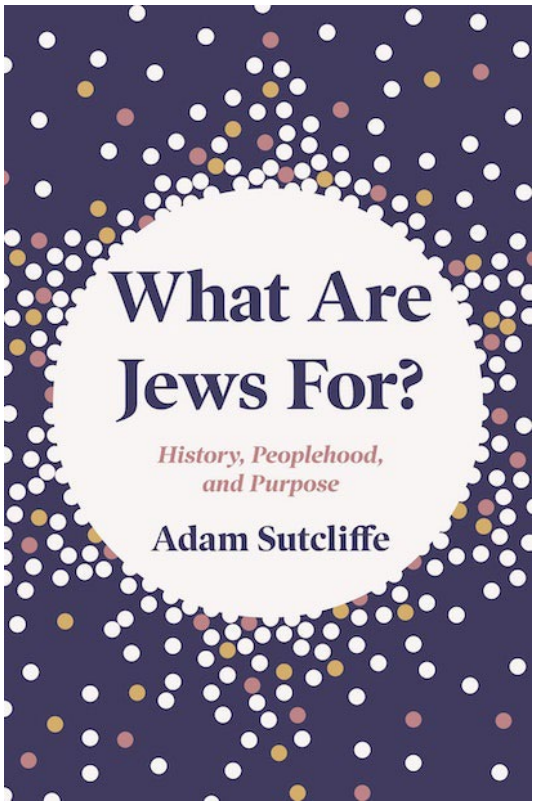
Book review by Revd Mark Dimond, Bishop's adviser for interreligious dialogue



What are Jews for?
by Adam Sutcliffe,
Princeton & Oxford, 2020

We could easily replace the word 'Jews' with 'Christians' in the title of this book, and it would raise all sorts of provocative questions. In this comprehensive survey, Adam Sutcliffe opens up a wide historical vista of the meaning of what it is to be Jewish in the world. He takes us from Abraham's instruction from God to the modern Israeli state. The meaning of Jewish identity in the world changes according to the era – the author tells us that the purpose of Jews is like a 'cultural palimpsest', implying that layers of meaning accumulate as time passes. It reminds us of T.S.Eliot's insight that the Christian faith is constantly adapting itself to suit the times.

The central argument is that there has been a constant tension between two opposing schools of thought: on the one hand, there is the emphasis on 'God's chosen people', a tightly-bound Jewish identity which rises above the fray of the world's goings-on. On the other, there is the integrationist or universalist view that Jewish belief has something to offer the world, known more recently as 'tikkun olan', whose contribution can be seen as 'the repair of the world'.

Early on, between around the fourth and seventh centuries, tractates on the theme of 'Avodah Zarah', meaning broadly 'idolatry', established the primacy of Jewish observances in relation to other religions. In the Middle Ages, this theme continued to be supported by Yehuda Halevi, who saw Jews as 'ontologically' different. However, the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who was influenced by the new age of rationalism, in the same way that Aquinas was later in the Christian world, opened up a new more liberal discourse on what it is to be Jewish.

By 1700 the divide opened up further. The Jewish philosopher Spinoza questioned elements of all three Abrahamic religions, and saw in Moses a rationalist wisdom. Not long after, Moses Mendelssohn argued for religious pluralism and advocated that the Torah should be translated into German.

Calls for and the eventual establishment of a Jewish nation-state in the twentieth century after two millennia of Jewish exile have sharpened the polarisation between 'universalists' and 'particularists' (for want of a better term). The Holocaust also raised questions of identity: did the Holocaust act as a spur to tightening Jewish identity? And if it did, did it also run the risk, paradoxically, of conflating the 'chosenness' of Jews with Nazi German supremacy? Or did it heighten the sense that Jewish people are those who perennially have had to suffer? Modern Jewish scholarship has also posed other new questions: for example, Edward Said suggested that Moses was originally an Egyptian, and that cultural identity on closer inspection is much more complex and fluid. In Israel today, its people are divided on the issue of identity. In 2018, a question was asked in an Israeli opinion poll: 'do you believe the Jewish people is a chosen people?' 56% said yes, 32% said no. Unravelling this is complicated business.

On the matter of interfaith dialogue, there is plenty of room for fruitful discussion. The author points out that it was only in 1974 through Rosemary Radford Ruether's work Faith and Fratricide that it was acknowledged, at least in academic circles, that the Christian faith ought not to be seen as 'superseding' the Jewish faith. A heightened consciousness of the plight of Jews – which includes Christians among others as persecutors over the centuries – is reflected in the public space today. The Holocaust memorial park in Berlin was opened in 2005; one in central London will be opened in 2025. Interfaith dialogue between Jews and Christians gained particular traction in Britain after the late Rabbi Jonathan Sack's publication of 'The Dignity of Difference' in 2002. In it, Sacks wrote about humanity making space for difference. We can enter this space and dwell upon the differences.