

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 22

**Adam Sutcliffe**, *Judaism and Enlightenment*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xv + 314 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-521-82015-4.

Review by Ronald Schechter, The College of William and Mary.

---

Adam Sutcliffe's *Judaism and Enlightenment* is a powerful reminder of the important role Judaism played in early modern European thought. In a breathtaking sweep of England, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, Sutcliffe incisively analyzes attitudes toward Judaism expressed in the writing of contemporary theologians, philosophers, and historians. Sutcliffe moves easily between sources in Latin, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and English, and the result is a work of erudition that will make scholars working with only one or two foreign languages blush. In addition to his discussion of attitudes *toward* Jews, Sutcliffe shows that Jews themselves participated in the debates about the meaning and value of Judaism. Jewish agency in this regard was most famously, but not exclusively, seen in the case of Baruch (later Benedict) Spinoza, the Jewish heretic whose philosophy of pantheism scandalized and fascinated thinkers of his own age and subsequent generations.

In addition to Spinoza, the *dramatis personae* in Sutcliffe's story include famous thinkers—Hobbes, Harrington, Locke, Bayle, and Voltaire—as well as many lesser-known figures such as the seventeenth-century Dutch religious philosopher Lodowijk Meyer and his heretical compatriot, Adriaan Koerbagh. Sutcliffe's treatment of this disparate group is learned and lucid, and the many subsections of this compact, fourteen-chapter book are worth reading separately, according to need. Despite the nearly encyclopedic diversity of the subject matter, the book's argument is relatively easy to summarize: Judaism constituted a particularly thorny problem for the Enlightenment.

From the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, Sutcliffe maintains, Christian scholars were fascinated with Judaism for a variety of reasons. Some sought the origin of languages through the study of ancient Hebrew. Others hoped to find the roots of their favored political institutions in the constitution of Israel. Still others read rabbinical texts in the hope of exposing flaws in Judaism and thereby winning converts. Even where they showed obligatory disdain for the rival religion, Sutcliffe argues, Christian writers on Judaism up to the mid-seventeenth century were by and large respectful of the Old Testament, rabbinical Judaism, and, even occasionally, of contemporary Jews who defended their religious beliefs and practices. In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the intellectual climate began to change significantly. The nascent Enlightenment increasingly viewed the study of Hebrew texts as dry and pointless, scorned attempts at finding political inspiration in the institutions of ancient Israel, and derided the Talmud as the epitome of superstition. Even the respect accorded Spinoza, who himself encouraged disdain for traditional Judaism, came at the cost of his Jewish identity; the more philosophers revered Spinoza, the less they viewed him as Jewish. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Sutcliffe claims, the status of Judaism in intellectual circles had declined dramatically. No longer universally relevant, it had become a bothersome particularity, an annoying challenge to the idea that humanity could and would learn to think and act according to the dictates of reason. What Sutcliffe wrote about the place of Judaism in the "Early" Enlightenment applies all the more to his interpretation of its reputation later still: "Like a stubborn shard of intellectual grit, Judaism was an ubiquitous, troubling and often frustrating presence in the minds of early advocates of reason and Enlightenment" (p. 18).

Before considering the virtues and deficiencies of this argument, it is worth placing in its own historical context. In his thinking about the Enlightenment, Sutcliffe greatly resembles Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the German-Jewish social philosophers whose *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) explored a paradox that Hegel had vividly described nearly a century and a half earlier in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806). Whereas Enlightenment purported to be a rational cure for the fear inspired by mythical thinking, Hegel had argued, it contained its own mythology to which it reverted when threatened by ideas or facts that resist its worldview. This mythology, characterized by reverence for uniformity, regularity, and, indeed, rationality itself, in turn fueled an attack on all “superstition” which culminated, according to Hegel, in the mindless destruction of the French Revolution.[1]

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the Nazi terror most poignantly illustrated the potential of Enlightenment’s hostility to difference. Their book received little attention until the 1970s, when it seemed to confirm an increasingly popular postmodern critique of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment had advertised itself as a means of human liberation, but postmodern critics such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard repeatedly charged it with merely creating new forms of oppression: from subtle control over key social concepts (such as “normal” and “abnormal,” “healthy” and “sick”) to the brutality of state terror and genocide. To this anti-Enlightenment movement, Horkheimer and Adorno appeared as especially prescient founding fathers.

Not surprisingly, the postmodern critique has shaped historical understanding of the Jews in the age of the Enlightenment. Once seen as a boon to the Jews thanks to its advocacy of tolerance, the Enlightenment quickly lost its good reputation. In his *French Enlightenment and the Jews* (1968), Arthur Hertzberg indicted the *philosophes* in general and Voltaire in particular as the source of modern anti-Semitism. Gary Kates has quite plausibly traced Hertzberg’s hostility toward the French Enlightenment to his Zionism—Hertzberg was the head of the World Zionist Congress—since that ideology has a vested interest in revealing the inhospitable nature of the Diaspora and hence the necessity of a Jewish state.[2] Yet the postmodern hostility to the Enlightenment certainly contributed to the popularity of Hertzberg’s book.

Sutcliffe’s book is far superior to Hertzberg’s. Whereas Hertzberg engaged in special pleading and read sources out of context in order to make a simplistic, teleological case against the French Enlightenment, Sutcliffe is judicious and cautious with his material. He explicitly denies that there was an “inexorable highway from the tensions of post-Enlightenment modernity to the genocide of Auschwitz and elsewhere” (p. 2). He even refuses to employ the term “anti-Semitism” to describe Enlightenment attitudes toward Jews, though his use of “allosemitism”—a coinage of postmodern moral philosopher Zygmunt Bauman meaning “the conviction that Jews are in some sense radically different from all others”—is perhaps less removed from “anti-Semitism” than Sutcliffe suspects (p. 9). Nevertheless, Sutcliffe is explicitly indebted to Horkheimer and Adorno, whose “seminal” book “bleakly but brilliantly recognized the fraught relationship of eighteenth-century idealism to the authoritarianism of the fascist era” and understood that “the mythic power of Judaism itself attracted ire, because it exposed the limits of Enlightenment rationalism” (p. 3).

Of course, simply because Sutcliffe adheres to a now unsurprising interpretation of the Enlightenment’s relationship to Judaism does not mean he is wrong to do so. Nevertheless, the lens furnished by Horkheimer and Adorno obscures certain important aspects of the Enlightenment. In particular, Sutcliffe sees the Enlightenment as unremittingly rationalistic, or “characterized essentially by a commitment to the unity and power of critical reason” (p. 12). In contrast, Judaism was the defining “Other,” a system (or non-system) of thought marked by irrationality, tradition, and superstition. It is true that Enlightenment philosophers, most notably Voltaire, occasionally took Jews to task for adhering to “irrational” beliefs and practices. Yet in the vast discussion of the Jews in eighteenth-century France, the Jews were far more likely to suffer criticism for their supposed hyper-rationality or calculating spirit than for their alleged irrationality. Their critics as well as the people who hoped to

“regenerate” them as useful citizens—and at times it was difficult to separate these groups—lamented their reputed inability to feel for their fellow human beings.[3] Similarly, in Germany the Orientalist professor Johann David Michaelis spoke for many when he doubted that Jews could live alongside Christians, since the former regarded the latter “with enmity or at least coldly.”[4] The critique of Jews as “cold” reveals an aspect of the Enlightenment that the Horkheimer/Adorno model does not account for. It highlights a powerful strain of the Enlightenment that privileged feeling over thinking, the heart over the head, sensibility over sense.

In addition to the framework provided by *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Sutcliffe’s periodization prevents him from seeing the importance of feeling in the Enlightenment. Although his book spans over two centuries, its center of gravity lies in “the four or five decades approximately centered on 1700” (pp. 12-13). In particular, Sutcliffe is most interested in the period beginning with the publication of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and ending around half a century later with the anonymous attack on institutional religion, *Traité des trois imposteurs* (1719). Like his dissertation adviser Jonathan Israel, who believes that “the real business” of the Enlightenment was “already over” by the 1740s,[5] Sutcliffe maintains, “Already by the 1740s most of the key arguments of the Enlightenment had been sketched out, and were even beginning to become commonplaces” (p. 13). Yet even if this is true, the emphasis on the senses in the late Enlightenment crucially altered the character of the movement. If the early Enlightenment was marked by Cartesian (and Spinozan) rationalism, the sensationalism of Locke and Condillac dominated eighteenth-century epistemology. Concomitantly, non-cognitivist ethics and the ideal of the “sensitive soul” deposed a more cerebral approach to human relations. These developments, in turn, were reflected in a sentimental discourse on the Jews.

A closer examination of the late Enlightenment, moreover, would have revealed a more intricate picture of the relationship between the Enlightenment and Judaism. Sutcliffe devotes a chapter to Voltaire, who is made to stand for the Late Enlightenment more generally, but he misses the complexity of Voltaire’s relationship to the Jews. Applying the Horkheimer/Adorno thesis to the *philosophe*, Sutcliffe writes, “Judaism preoccupies Voltaire because it encapsulates the residuum of myth and tradition that is impervious to his Enlightenment critique” (p. 238). He cannot attack the Jews, however, without using their own flawed writings, especially the Hebrew Bible, and this contradiction “drives Voltaire’s relentless repetition, with increasing ferocity as his writing career progressed, of the barbarism, immorality, and insignificance of the Jews” (p. 239). This interpretation not only leaves unexplained Voltaire’s many sympathetic statements with regard to the Jews, but it also oversimplifies the role the Jews played in his thinking. Voltaire turned to the Jews when reflecting on such matters as the diversity of religious perspectives, the cruelty and barbarity of persecution, the utility of commerce, and the human capacity for change. He alternately defended and criticized them for their adherence to tradition, questioned and affirmed their ability to change. He returned obsessively to the subject of the Jews because he could not make up his mind whether and under what circumstances such change was possible or desirable, not because he abhorred all challenges to rationalism.[6]

Moreover, the Enlightenment after the early eighteenth century consisted of more than Voltaire. Other *philosophes* wrote extensively on the Jews. The *Encyclopédie*, for example, reveals a continued fascination with the Jews, both ancient and modern, and though some of its articles predictably criticize the Talmud as the product of superstition, Biblical Judaism retains a high degree of respect.[7] Nor does the Horkheimer/Adorno model explain the great German dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose passionate defense of the Jews was echoed in the writings of reformers such as the Prussian minister Christian Wilhelm von Dohm.[8] Indeed, the increasing movement toward the emancipation of the Jews—the abolition of laws discriminating against them—from the 1780s seems to indicate increasing respect for the Jews, or at least a decline in the “allosemitism” that Sutcliffe sees as characteristic of the Enlightenment. Sutcliffe mentions the *Encyclopédie* and Lessing in passing but does not consider the problem they pose to his argument. As to the movement for Jewish rights, which succeeded most dramatically in revolutionary France but also achieved notable gains in Austria early in the 1780s,

Sutcliffe suggests that this was somehow inevitable. He vaguely refers to “the discomfiting realities of actual Jewish existence” (i.e. the presence of real Jews, not just mythical Old Testament figures) and asserts, “These realities ... could not be evaded indefinitely” (p. 250). Yet one could say the same thing about the “realities” of other groups deprived of rights, including women, who did not achieve legal equality in several countries (including France) until after the Second World War. By treating the emancipation of the Jews as inevitable, Sutcliffe evades an obvious challenge to his thesis regarding the declining respect for Judaism.

It seems unfair to ask an author who is astonishingly knowledgeable about two centuries of European intellectual history to have acquired the same facility with the second half of the eighteenth century. Yet this standard is implicit in the goal that Sutcliffe himself set when writing a book titled *Judaism and Enlightenment*. Despite its shortcomings, however, this book is a remarkable scholarly achievement. Early modern intellectual historians will ignore it at their peril.

---

#### NOTES

[1] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), trans. A[rnold] V. Miller, pp. 328-63.

[2] Gary Kates, “Jews into Frenchmen: Nationality and Representation in Revolutionary France,” in Ferenc Fehér, ed., *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1990), pp. 105-7.

[3] See my “Rationalizing the Enlightenment: Postmodernism and Theories of Anti-Semitism,” in Daniel Gordon, ed., *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 93-116.

[4] Göttingische Anzeigen von Gelehrten Sachen, June 13, 1754. Reproduced in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Die Juden: Ein Lustspiel in Einem Aufzuge verfertigt im Jahr 1749* (1749; reprint Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), pp. 50-53.

[5] Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 6. Israel’s precursor in the study of the early, “radical” Enlightenment is Margaret Jacob. See her *Radical Enlightenment: Freemasons, Pantheists, Republicans* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

[6] See my *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 46-53.

[7] Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews*, pp. 56-64.

[8] Lessing, *Die Juden; Nathan der Weise: Ein dramatisches Gedicht in fünf Aufzügen* (1779; reprint Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990); and Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (Berlin, 1781).

The College of William and Mary  
rbsche@wm.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Review* Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 22

ISSN 1553-9172