

Eugene J. Fisher
***A Life in Dialogue: Building Bridges
Between Catholics and Jews, A Memoir***

(St. Petersburg, FL: Mr. Media Books, 2017), paperback, x + 127 pp.

and

Debbie Weissman
***Memoirs of a Hopeful Pessimist:
A Life of Activism Through Dialogue***

(Jerusalem and New York: Urim Publications and KTAV Publishing,
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These volumes present complementary portraits of the fascinating, ground-breaking, and frequently turbulent careers of two leaders in interfaith dialogue and activism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They combine academic insights with personal recollections. While Eugene Fisher lives in America and Debbie Weissman lives in Israel, they range far and wide geographically in seeking to achieve their goal of *tikkun* (repair –in so far as is possible) in the post-Shoah world. Fisher is a Catholic scholar educated in both Catholic institutions (he has a B.A. from Sacred Heart Seminary and an M.A. in Catholic Theology from the University of Detroit Mercy) and secular institutions (he has an M.A. and a Ph.D. from New York University in, respectively, Jewish Studies and Hebrew Culture and Education). He recently retired following a thirty-year career as the first lay Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Weissman grew up in New York among those who spoke Yiddish, and she received a solid Hebrew and Jewish education (though with little exposure to religious life). She received a B.A. from Barnard College and an M.A. from New

York University. A year spent in Israel solidified her commitment to that country and expanded her knowledge of Judaism. She went on to earn a Ph.D. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A committed educator and activist, Weissman held positions as a teacher of Jewish Education and Women's Studies at the Hebrew University and also directed the Kerem Institute which trains Israeli high school teachers. She also served two terms as president of the International Council of Christians and Jews (2008-2014) during which time the ICCJ redoubled its outreach efforts to interfaith groups worldwide.

Both Fisher and Weissman carried out their work amidst major developments in the interfaith world, including the sea-change ushered in by the Second Vatican Council's promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* (NA). Subsequent Church documents extended the insights of NA and offered practical guidance for its application. These developments, which many thought impossible, were sources of hope and made possible a vigorous Jewish-Christian dialogue over the last fifty years. During the last few decades, the authors note, alongside major improvements there were also serious disagreements. These include the canonization of Edith Stein (1998), the Auschwitz convent controversy (1984-1993), the Vatican's failure to open its war-time archives dealing with Pope Pius XII's actions during the Holocaust, and the highly controversial Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Fisher sought to educate Catholics about the sensitivity of the subjects dealt with in Gibson's film and reached out to Jewish leaders, though he encountered sharp internal dissension about the film in the politically and religiously fractured Catholic Church. Weissman often taught Judaism to Christians while challenging religious intolerance and patriarchy among certain segments of Israeli society. She also spoke out for women's rights and entered the cauldron of Israeli politics with her vigorous support for the Oslo Accords.

Fisher recounts his important role as an interpreter of what might be termed "Vaticanese." He helped many to understand the nuanced doctrinal statements and theological pronouncements emanating from the Holy See. Likewise, he has also helped Jews understand the complex Vatican bureaucracy. Contrary to the perception of the Church as a monolithic and hierarchical institution whose views are unhesitatingly accepted by Catholics everywhere, he revealed internal tensions between conservative and liberal factions. This has been valuable, as the swirls and eddies of Vatican politics can be deeply wounding and confusing to the Jewish people. Fisher has rightly subtitled his memoirs "Building Bridges between Catholics and Jews" because he carefully explains the statements of high-ranking Catholic thinkers in the dialogue such as Cardinals William H. Keeler and Edward Idris Cassidy. He also draws on scholarly insights of thinkers such as Professor Philip Cunningham.

Fisher deals forthrightly with seemingly intractable issues. These include the controversy over the canonization of Edith Stein. She was born Jewish, and while she became a nun she was nonetheless murdered by the Nazis because of her Jewish origins. Pope John Paul II publically acknowledged this fact while at the same time claiming that Stein was also a Catholic martyr. Jewish outrage in this matter was widely expressed, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in articles by Rabbi

David Polish and Professor Adam Gregerman, which Fisher cites. They saw the move as an attempt to appropriate the Shoah for Christianity. Fisher, however, claims that the inclusion of Edith Stein has provided an opportunity for Catholic teaching materials to “take up the issue of the *Shoah* and the death of the six million” (p. 68). The Auschwitz Convent controversy, similarly, evoked very different responses by Jews and Catholics because of their very different histories. The cross, Fisher sensitively notes, symbolizes resurrection for Christianity and persecution for Judaism. That nuns, even cloistered nuns such as the Carmelites at Auschwitz, were praying for the victims of National Socialism was deeply offensive to Jews, though it was intended as a mark of respect by the nuns. As Fisher recognizes, “The crisis was not over a physical building or a simple cross. It was over the two millennia of history and the meaning of the Shoah” (p. 71). The convent was eventually moved following the pope’s intervention, but not before much bitterness and anguish.

The controversy over the Gibson film exposed the chasm between conservative and progressive forces in the Catholic (and Christian) world. The United State Conference of Catholic Bishops admirably established guidelines for how passion plays should present Jesus’ passion, which Gibson ignored. Gibson also refused to recognize the authority of *NA*. Despite this, Fisher interprets the lack of an antisemitic backlash in the wake of Gibson’s anti-historical and antisemitic film to *NA*’s legacy, including the rejection of the deicide charge and a positive theology of Judaism. This is certainly an important insight. Left unexplained, however, is the bishops’ lack of criticism for the Gibson film, though it violated every one of the tenets of how to correctly present the passion.

Debbie Weissman is a tireless worker on behalf of interfaith relations, and her efforts extend beyond the Abrahamic traditions. She made *aliyah* in 1972 and was an early advocate for changing attitudes toward women and about gender in Orthodox Judaism. In addition, she narrates her participation in several World Council of Churches (WCC) meetings as a guest speaker. In her first WCC conference she interacted with sixty women representing nine different traditions, including Wiccans. The WCC is viewed with suspicion by many in the Jewish community as hostile to Israel. But Weissman is determined to open and not close doors. Her initiative has not been an easy one and, in fact, some might analogize it to the tale of Sisyphus. Yet Weissman is tenacious. She approvingly cites former Israeli President Shimon Peres who observed: “Optimists and pessimists die the same death; they just live totally different lives” (p. 71). Weissman describes herself as a “hopeful pessimist.”

Weissman’s activism extends beyond interreligious relations. She writes about educational, religious, and political issues, including her teaching Israel’s first university-level course in Jewish women’s studies, her role in founding the Jerusalem synagogue Kehillat Yedidya (which has been at the forefront of advocating for greater women’s roles in Orthodox Judaism), and her commitment to a two-state solution.

Weissman’s memoir includes helpful appendices containing a thumbnail history of post-Shoah interfaith statements, as well as the Ten Points of Seelisberg

from 1947 and the ICCJ's Twelve Points of Berlin from 2009. The latter stresses the importance of differentiating between fair-minded criticism of Israel and anti-semitism, the need for ongoing interreligious dialogue, and the development of relationships with all those whose work responds to the demands of environmental stewardship. These points illustrate the connection between interfaith and international concerns.

I have a long personal connection with Fisher. He was my first interfaith dialogue partner at a small college in upstate New York over three decades ago. Because of his sophistication and fairness, some joked that one could see an exemplary model of dialogue if one could hear him talking to himself.

These two memoirs offer valuable insights into interreligious dialogue, as well as into other issues (such as Weissman's advocacy for women in Jewish life). To their credit, both authors are able to show how one can make progress on these issues. The issues they address are vital and, therefore, contentious. They make clear the many obstacles they faced and the need for steadfastness and also a willingness to negotiate and compromise. Perhaps the most vital lesson emerging from these two memoirs is the need to become educated about the Other, thereby dispelling illusions and ignorance.