Current Factors Affecting the Publication and Distribution of Traditional Jewish Literature in the U.S.

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Definition

The area of Judaic publishing discussed in this paper is difficult to define. The category of traditional literature would seem to include any material that reflects the traditional practice and philosophy of Judaism. Upon closer examination, however, we find that the works in this category primarily reflect the Orthodox practice of Judaism. The discussion could thus more accurately be entitled religious than traditional publishing. We can define this as including materials concerning the Bible, Talmud, Jewish law, and Jewish philosophy — works that are devoted exclusively to classic Jewish texts and to the Orthodox theologians who write about them. This paper focuses mainly on American publications in this genre.

Dr. B. Barry Levy has written about the "Orthodox publishing explosion" (Levy, 1985–1987). We must keep in mind that Orthodox Judaism is not monolithic, however. There is great diversity of practice and philosophy among various groups of Orthodox Jews.

The Consumers

For such a specialized product as religious publications, there is a very limited audience. Within these limits, there is also diversity, however.

The first group of consumers is the newly Orthodox. The Jewish community is currently experiencing a spiritual rebirth in the form of the so-called "Baal Teshuvah movement." People who have come from generations of assimilation want to reassume their Jewish identity. They may have little more than a Hebrew school education, but Baale Teshuvah have a strong desire to read classic Jewish theological works. Being acculturated Americans, they may find it difficult to comprehend classic Jewish texts in the original language. Thus, a new genre of Torah literature has emerged. This literature is written by Americans, for Americans, and in a totally American idiom (Preface by Aryeh Kaplan, in Oppenheim, 1979, p. xiii).

The phenomenon of Jews desiring texts in the vernacular is not new. In the 18th century, Rabbi Jacob Culi wrote an all-encompassing work that allowed people who lacked facility with Hebrew and/or Aramaic to tap the rich literature of Judaism. This work, entitled Meam Loez, was written in Ladino (the daily language of his Sephardic community); it allowed Jews to break the language barrier and move closer to their heritage. The Meam Loez anthology, comprising all forms of religious literature — including the Talmud, Midrash, and Jewish law — is as popular today as it was in the 18th century. It was recently translated from the original Ladino by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan; the translation is known as the Torah Anthology. This work gives the reader the flavor of the original texts, while making it easier for the reader to understand them.

The largest, and by far the most popular, component of religious materials is original works in translation. There is a definite correlation between the growth of the Baal Teshuvah movement and the publication of primary and secondary religious source material in the English language. The major American producers of such material are Mesorah Publications, publishers of the Artscroll series, and Feldheim, an established religious publisher. Artscroll issues materials in categories ranging from Mishnah, liturgy, and prayerbooks to children's literature. Feldheim offers more translations, particularly of German origin, and a wider choice of topics (Levy, 1986–1987).

Feldheim has published classic works in Jewish ethics, as well as Jewish law, for many years. The firm is also responsible for publishing the writings and philosophy of the great 19th-century German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch. These works are certainly important to the Baal Teshuvah's quest for knowledge of Judaism.

There are also bibliographies that can assist the Baal Teshuvah in finding out what classic texts and secondary sources are available. One example is the 1979 publication, The Study and Practice of Judaism, by Michah Falk Oppenheim (currently Head of Bibliographic Control at the Jewish Theological Seminary Library). This bibliography includes materials from publishers of religious material other than those already mentioned, such as Yeshiva University Press, Ktav, Kehot, and Maznaim. In recent years, however, Artscroll has become the most popular and the most prolific publisher of religious works.

The second primary group of consumers for religious materials in general, and works in translation specifically, includes what we might call "yeshiva alumni." These are people who attended an Orthodox yeshiva from the earliest years of their education through high school, college, and possibly even through rabbinic training.

It has been said that yeshiva alumni desire works in translation not because of an inability to read the original, but rather because of the ease of access and brevity of these works. American religious publishing has been called the "fast-vort [Yiddish for Torah thought] industry," aimed at the person who wants to study the weekly Torah portion or Mishnah without much effort (Levy, 1986–1987).

The interest of former yeshiva students in translations may also be related to a pedagogic problem. In American yeshivot founded after the Holocaust, classic texts were taught as they were in the shtetl, using a pedagogical approach that was predicated on the roles of family and community in an educational support system, but without consideration of the American acculturation process. In recent years, Orthodox educational institutions, through training programs of Torah Umesorah, have become aware of better methods of teaching the classic texts. The schools are now concentrating on teaching the fundamentals needed for mastering texts. Today's yeshiva students are thus experiencing a fundamental change in religious education, while the previous generation continues to experience difficulty in studying texts in the original. The wealth of translations and explanatory materials has given the latter group a chance to learn more.
Works such as the Kehati commentary on the Mishnah help clarify the text for lay people studying Talmud. In recent years, the Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization has begun translating Kehati’s work into English—a sure sign that a relatively knowledgeable and educated group is using the material.

The Steinsaltz Talmud is another example of filling a pedagogic void in a yeshiva student’s education. This edition of the Talmud is vocalized, with Hebrew commentary on the text, and differs greatly in format from the traditional Talmud. In the Fall of 1989, Random House began publishing an English translation of this important work.

Acceptability

As stated above, the primary consumers of religious texts are Orthodox Jews. When these people buy a text, they want to be assured that it conforms strictly to Orthodox Judaism. One way of guaranteeing this is to secure an approbation, or haskamah, by a recognized contemporary sage. The written testimony of a sage as to the acceptability of a book serves the same function as rabbinic supervision on food products.

A haskamah appears on almost all religious Hebraica appearing for the first time. It is crucial for sales, especially if the author is relatively unknown. The importance of the sage giving the haskamah has a definite effect on sales. The use of the haskamah is more important in Israel than it is in the U.S., owing to factionalism in Israel. Unfortunately, this hekhsher (rabbinical approval) has at present become politicized there.

When an author wants a haskamah, he applies directly to his teachers and leading rabbis. They are given a pre-publication copy of the book to read. Most of the time, a haskamah states that the author is trustworthy, but does not necessarily comment on the contents of the book per se. The consumer very rarely reads the haskamah but trusts that it provides testimony to the authoritativeness of the work.

In recent years, there has been a major shift to the right in Orthodox Judaism. As a result, strict standards that reflect this trend have been applied to publishing. Right-wing elements are extremely critical of materials that do not reflect their collective thinking. Negative criticism may have a significant effect on sales.

Right-wing criticism is even a factor in the publication of children’s books. Publishers must be aware of religious sensitivities when producing children’s materials. Certain children’s books portray all fathers with beards and all children with peyos (earlocks). The implication, as subtle as it may be, is that this represents Orthodoxy. This de facto censorship reflects a move away from the outside world, which is perceived more as a threat to religious purity and existence, than as making a conscious effort to mold the thinking of the Jewish people.

Throughout history, Jews have looked to their religious leaders for guidance. In the present climate of excessive factionalism, however, each group tries to insulate its members from different opinions. Even English translations of classics are edited to reflect a particular philosophy—to the point, even, of transforming the original intent of the author. English translations of commentary are often not annotated, and, as far as their faithfulness to the original is concerned, one is at the mercy of the translator. Excerpts from commentaries remove a vital element for research: seeing the original in its context.

The Future

A librarian has expressed the opinion that the publication of digests of primary source material, along with translations, will cause the Jewish people to forget the original sources, and to replace them with the digests. In defense of these digests and translations, it should be noted, however, that the increase in the number of religious publications that can be used both by the yeshiva-educated and the Baal Teshuvah will make such people more aware of their Jewish heritage. Readers of such works will acquire skills that they have never had, or that were very weak. The increase in the use of these materials will ultimately lead to an increase in the study of the original sources. The translations broaden the base of the reader, and inspire a desire for more intensive Jewish education for children.

Each insular Jewish group, such as Hasidim, will continue to publish materials addressing the specific needs of its adherents. Thus, religious publishing constitutes more than the mere dissemination of the written word. Rather, it reflects people trying to understand its beginnings and its present, and that is planning for its future.

Notes

1. Responses to questionnaire (reproduced in Appendix A) by Jack Goldman, of Otsar Sefarim-Judaica Press, and Dr. Sid Leiman, Chairman, Department of Judaic Studies, Brooklyn College, City University of New York.

2. Sid Leiman, response to questionnaire.


4. Ibid.

5. There was a controversy concerning the title The Festivals in the Halacha by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevi. The English translation omitted a reference to the State of Israel which appeared in the original Hebrew version. See Tradition, volume 22, no. 4, pp. 120–121 and volume 23, no. 1, pp. 98–99.

6. Sid Leiman, response to questionnaire.

References


Appendix A

Questionnaire

The following is the text of a questionnaire developed for the purpose of gathering information for this paper:

Introduction

The object of this survey is to discover some of the factors that affect the publication of literature of a purely rabbinic, ethnic, and philosophical nature.

The use of the term “traditional materials (Orthodox)” reflects the intensive interest of Orthodox Jews in these materials.

These materials are for the most part what are commonly called “seforim.”

The results of this survey will be part of a presentation at the annual convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries.

Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Are there any overall criteria used by any publishers to determine the publication of traditional materials?

2. Does the haskamah play a part in publishing these traditional materials today?

3. What types of traditional materials are published with a haskamah and which are not? As for those that are published with one—is this required for publication?
4. How does an author obtain a haskamah? Is there a standard procedure that an author follows?

5. Does the name of the person giving the haskamah affect the sale of materials?

6. In countries with a Chief Rabbinate, is this procedure more controlled?

7. Are there any factors affecting the publication of traditional materials in Israel that are different from those in this country?

8. Are there so-called "vanity presses" that publish original traditional materials?

9. What determines the publication of traditional materials in English translation?

10. Does the growth in the number of traditional materials in English reflect the Baal Teshuvah movement?

11. Opinion: Do you believe that the increase in translation of original works will cause the lessening of the study of original works?

Appendix B
Directory of Major American Publishers of Traditional/Religious Works

1. Feldheim, Philip, Inc.
   200 Airport Executive Pk.
   Spring Valley, New York 10977
   (914) 356-2282, 1-800-237-7149

2. Judaica Press, Inc.
   521 Fifth Avenue
   New York, New York 10175
   (212) 260-0520

   900 Jefferson Street
   Hoboken, New Jersey 07030
   (201) 963-9524

4. Kehot Publication Society (Lubavitch)
   770 Eastern Parkway
   Brooklyn, New York 11213

5. Mesorah Publications, Ltd. (ArtScroll)
   4401 Second Avenue
   Brooklyn, New York 11232
   1-800-Mesorah

6. Maznaim Publishing Corporation
   (Torah Anthology, agent for Mosad Harav Kook)
   4304 12th Avenue
   Brooklyn, New York 11219
   (718) 438-7680

7. S. Goldman—Otzar Hasefarim
   33 Canal Street
   New York, New York 10002

8. Sepher-Hermon
   1265 46th Street
   Brooklyn, New York 11219

9. Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora
   515 Park Avenue
   New York, New York 10022

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KLEINBURD (Continued from p. 61)


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