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'Jewish radar' ineffective these days, UW prof says in new book

By Robert Roseth

News and Information

Martin Jaffee's "Jewish radar" is failing him, and he believes it's a sign of the times, at least on America's West Coast.

Jaffee, professor of international studies and holder of the Samuel & Althea Stroum Chair in Jewish Studies, finds that his recent experiences in Seattle in identifying Jews are at odds with what his upbringing on Long Island taught him. He has collected his observations on this topic and others in a new book, *The End of Jewish Radar: Snapshots of a Postethnic American Judaism*. Many of the essays in the volume were previously published in JT News, the local Jewish newspaper to which Jaffee contributes a regular column.

Growing up in the New York area 50 years ago, in a community with a large Jewish population, Jaffee figured he had pretty good radar for identifying Jews on sight. In his community, religion -- what some would call ethnicity -- "was rooted in that barely understood grab bag of life-transition rites and domestic customs.... It was a package of language and food, gesture, personal style, and 'don't forget' historical resentments that permeated one's being."

Jaffee, by age 8, could spot a Jew from "half a block away on a dark winter school morning." Fast-forward to Seattle 2006. Jaffee encounters an Asian man who, outward appearances notwithstanding, is unquestionably Jewish. Jaffee is surprised by this physical manifestation of what he terms "American Jewish post-ethnic assimilation" and concludes, "Jewish radar, Jaffee-style, is dead."

Jaffee says the growing diversity in the American Jewish community is in part a product of a society that is more accepting of Judaism than any culture since the Roman Empire; this has facilitated a growth in voluntary conversions, usually triggered by intermarriage -- currently, surveys suggest about 10 percent of Jews are converts.

"I'm not a sociologist," Jaffee says, "so what I'm reporting in this essay and elsewhere in the book are my observations. But I see Judaism, at least in Seattle, existing with a very different ethnic base. Even the Orthodox community, which is regarded as being quite insular, is racially diverse."

Jaffee has been writing for JT News since 2004. "It all began with a program I had on a local radio show that featured Jewish themes," he says. These essays he read on the air evolved into a printed column. When he decided to compile the columns into a book, he had trouble finding a publisher familiar with his particular genre: humorous essays, featuring a thickly Jewish idiom. So he ended up publishing the book himself.

The essays fall into four categories, according to Jaffee. They include American Jewish practice, "much of which falls under major ideological radar screens"; classical and lesser known Jewish texts, and how to read them; living as a minority group member in a predominantly Christian society, including the perennial problem of Christmas; and how Jews present themselves in American society.

Jaffee's column, which carries his photo, has given him a kind of celebrity within the community. "People will come up to me in public and thank me for what I've written. I find this very gratifying." At the same time, Jaffee is grateful that his column only appears monthly. "When I started, the first columns seemed to write themselves. Ideas would just come to me, as if from Mars. Now, it's harder. I'm concerned about repeating myself. And I want to find ways of keeping the spontaneity. The result is they take more time because they are more consciously crafted."

Jaffee says the columns that brought him the most attention included one comparing Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen from a Jewish point of view. Another was about the history of Jews in jazz. An almost-obligatory column about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* brought many comments, as did one about why the Jews rejected Jesus. "My

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Martin Jaffee

Mary Levin

Christmas columns are always well received," he says.

Jaffee strives to have a light touch in his essays. "People like satire and humor. I think they're tired of too much serious, ponderous, guilt-inducing writing about Jewish meaning. It's the same approach I try to take in my classes. I can't imagine teaching without humor. I want my columns to be as accessible as my lectures."

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