

Jewish Identity in Multicultural Australia

By Jennifer Creese.

Contemporary Anthropology of Religion

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024

Pp. xv + 242, ISBN: 978-3-031-36347-4

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Jewish communities hold great fascination for researchers, from anthropology to genetics and more. Western culture holds less interest, perhaps it is too large a topic, too difficult, or perhaps it does not exist outside of many smaller communities and identities of which it is comprised. In *Jewish Identity in Multicultural Australia*, Jennifer Creese provides an extensive ethnographic account of her own Jewish community of origin in Southeast Queensland, specifically around Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Despite the fact that it is a relatively small community even by Australian standards, or perhaps because of this, the author is able to provide a clear and very well-written picture of Jewish life and the complex interactions between individual belief and public community events, between the overlapping ethnic and religious elements of Judaism, and the influence of Zionism and the state of Israel.

Creese provides an extensive history of the community, and an explanation of most of the specifically Jewish ceremonies and customs, before weaving through the complexities of personal identity and religious practice, official religious and public community events, identity as both Australians and Jews, and a connection to an international Jewish community. To this are added pro- and anti-Zionist feelings and varying loyalty to the State of Israel. In addition, there is a long glossary which alone would be an asset to anyone starting out on research in this area.

I particularly liked the extensive history of the Jewish community in Queensland, from the original British settlers to Russian emigres and Holocaust survivors. I did not know that Australia took more Holocaust survivors per capita than any other country, but this in the context of Australian Jewish Holocaust commemoration is entirely logical. The extensive history of the Jewish community in Brisbane, which like mainstream Australian history comprises multiple waves of migrants from different countries over time, grounds cultural and religious practices in a comprehensible framework.

Insider ethnography is always challenging, especially in small communities when, realistically, anonymity is marginal. Particularly in this case, I imagine many members of the Queensland Jewish community will be anxious to read about themselves and their community and identify various individuals and events. Despite being an academic text, I love that the writing



style is sufficiently accessible for the lay reader. The work is produced tactfully, but does not avoid more difficult issues such as the dominance of northern European Ashkenazi culture, perhaps reflecting Australian culture as a whole, the use of fear and antisemitism to unite the community and the very broad range of feeling towards the State of Israel, despite its permeation into many aspects of Australian Jewish life.

While I am not familiar with the culture of Queensland, and I have been told that it is a very strange place, it is interesting as an Australian to see how individuals construct a Jewish identity in terms of an 'Other' in Australia. That 'other' Australia seems far whiter, and very much more Christian than anything I have experienced, with religion playing very little role in Australian public life in my observation.

Creese is very frank in recording the division between public and private Judaism, with many individuals publicly supporting a united Orthodox pro-Israel community and events, while privately having differing views or reservations. I was surprised at the number of people who claimed to have little or no religious faith, yet participated regularly in religious events, for cultural or other reasons. Creese is also very open in documenting the way in which fear, specifically of antisemitism, is used to maintain community cohesion and victim status in the wider community, while also indicating that it does not seem to be a serious issue or cause anyone great concern. On an individual level, antisemitism is seen as something that could happen, and therefore one should maintain vigilance, rather than a present threat.

The 'theoretical' aspects of anthropology—kinship, identity, ritual—are well considered and discussed. I would be interested in more information on the basis of the power structure, with organisations such as the Queensland Jewish Board of Deputies mentioned frequently and clearly influential, but without explaining how its membership is recruited, or introducing its membership. The money trail however is well documented, with constant events and fundraising, a significant amount of which is for Israel, and which returns in the form of bursaries and travel grants, religious resources and pro-Israel propaganda material.

In an insider ethnography, a reader should be aware of a favourable or sympathetic bias towards the community being studied. For obvious reasons, those who avoid or leave the community receive less emphasis than those who remain, and those who remain are invested in promoting their organisations in the best light. Creese mentions the migrants from Israel, most of whom avoid the Australian Jewish community and socialise among themselves, but other 'non-joiners' are by their very nature invisible.

In a study such as this one, of a community which benefits in many ways from an official policy of multiculturalism, it seems unlikely that there would be any unfavourable evaluations of the policy. Furthermore, the Queensland Jewish community has a particularly thought-out, measured and sensible approach to their own image and place in Australian society; emphasising

their place in Australian history, such as fighting in both world wars, for example. Community leadership maintains a policy of emphasising where possible their 'Australianness' not only historically, but in sport and culture, such as the kosher sausage sizzle. It remains to be seen if multiculturalism benefits all groups and all Australians, and if it is successful for less urban, educated and westernised communities.

Nevertheless, this will be a significant book for anyone studying Jewish communities, for studies of multiculturalism in Australia and for the Jewish community in Queensland which has an incomparable record of its history as well as a detailed description of its presence in the early twenty-first century. Creese provides a clear and understandable picture of a very cohesive community, mechanisms by which that cohesion is achieved, and the differing views and approaches of individuals within that community. This is a terrific book, not just because it is engaging and readable, but also because it is thoroughly grounded in theory and well referenced. As such, I think it would be an excellent source on undergraduate reading lists in anthropology and associated disciplines. Multiculturalism, and in particular multicultural Australia, are policies which have been adopted by governments without a great deal of critical evaluation. Studies, such as this one, can go some way to rectifying this gap in knowledge and hopefully similar research in other communities can be undertaken in the future.