

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Until A.D. 1200, all nuns were cloistered. Most were the daughters of aristocrats who could afford the dowries demanded by the cloisters; many women were attracted by the independence and intellectual life not available elsewhere.

Today, more than 200 Roman Catholic cloistered convents in the United States house 3,800 "contemplative" nuns. While their "active" sisters (some 120,000 strong) teach, heal, and do missionary work, says Lieblich, these secluded women seek solitude "to witness the primacy of prayer in the Church, to serve as a reminder of the contemplative dimension in all lives, and to intervene for others before God."

Some cloisters conform to age-old practices—the 38 Poor Clare nuns in Roswell, New Mexico, go barefoot year-round and whip themselves with knotted cords three times weekly. But most have abandoned "the hairshirt habits and the almost total silence of the past" in the wake of the liberalizing 1962–65 Second Vatican Council, Lieblich reports. Most sisters can talk to outsiders or even leave the cloister to shop, vote, or see a doctor.

Even so, sisters, for the most part, lead lives of self-denial and unvaried routine. After the two years of college or other "real-life" experience required for entry into a cloister, another five to seven years must elapse before the nun takes her final vows. "We want women," says one prioress, "not girls."

Despite such demands, as well as the American public's vague dismay and the not uncommon resentment of the nuns' families, the cloisters' population rose slightly between 1977 and 1979. (During the same period, 3,807 "active" nuns left their orders.) Anachronistic as the cloisters may appear, the future of the contemplative life seems secure.

Discovering Judaism's Mystics

"The Greatness of Gershom Scholem" by Hyam Maccoby, in *Commentary* (Sept. 1983), 165 East 65th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Judaism seems the most earthbound of the world's major religions, focused on the conduct of everyday family and community life and on personal morality. Yet the faith has a powerful mystical dimension that went largely unrecognized for centuries before historian Gershom Scholem (1897–1981) brought it to light.

Scholem, born in Berlin, rebelled against the staid, assimilationist German-Jewish milieu of his youth. Early in his university career, he became fascinated with ancient Jewish mystical writing. Jewish scholars of the day disdained this "wild, strange subject," writes Maccoby, a librarian and lecturer at Leo Baeck College in London. Indeed, among rabbis, access to the texts was accorded to only a few.

Scholem's first task was to collect the widely scattered manuscripts written by many different Jews over 18 centuries. By dating and analyzing them, he discovered that Jewish mysticism had changed dramatically over time. Two chief bodies of writing emerged: the Merkavah, dating from the first few centuries A.D., and the more sophis-

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ticated Kabbalah, from the 11th century.

The mystics defied talmudic injunctions against speculation about God and his ways. Indeed, the Kabbalah offers a biography of God: "God is even provided with a wife," Maccoby reports, "and, eventually, with a cosmic love story . . . with tragic episodes and a happy ending." The mystics also broke down the traditional Judaic separation of matter and spirit, man and transcendent God. For example, says Maccoby, a 16th-century Palestinian Jew named Isaac Luria argued, "In order to create the world, God had had to exile part of Himself from Himself; and this creative withdrawal (*tzimtzum*) or exile was what was being re-enacted on earth by Israel."

The mystics can also be described in part as Jewish fundamentalists: "If the Bible speaks of the 'hand' of God," Maccoby notes, "this to the kabbalists is not just a metaphor for His influence on events, but a real hand." Scholem's greatest achievement, Maccoby believes, was to show how periodic outbursts of mysticism have changed Judaism and infused it with new energy. In *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (1957), for example, Scholem chronicled the brief career of a 17th-century Palestinian Jew who publicly violated Jewish dietary and other laws and claimed divine status, a blasphemy that many local Jewish leaders accepted without protest. Sabbatai won a wide following, and although the movement collapsed after he was forcibly converted to Islam, he left Jewish law and liturgy altered.

Scholem's scholarship encouraged many Jews to acknowledge the hidden mystical aspect of their faith. "After his work," Maccoby concludes, "we can no longer think of the history of Judaism as one of outer tribulations but inner calm."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Death by Trauma

"Trauma" by Donald D. Trunkey, in *Scientific American* (Aug. 1983), P.O. Box 5969, New York, N.Y. 10017.

The battles against cancer and heart disease top the list of U.S. medical priorities, but trauma—injuries from wounds, burns, or falls—takes, by some measures, a heavier toll.

In 1982, cancer and heart disease together took 1.2 million lives in the United States. Trunkey, a San Francisco General Hospital surgeon, reports that 165,000 Americans died from trauma last year. But because trauma claims primarily youthful victims—it is the leading cause of death among those up to age 38—it cuts more deeply into lifespans. The two well-known killers each reduced American lives by some 1.8 million years in 1975; the loss to trauma was nearly four million years.