



Jewish Views of Christianity: Some Reflections

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Much has been written in recent years on Jewish-Christian relations, including developments in Jewish attitudes towards Christianity.

One excellent survey is Eugene Korn's chapter "Rethinking Christianity: Rabbinic Positions and Possibilities" in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*^[1] which presents a well-documented overview of Jewish views of Christianity over the centuries, some theological, but primarily in terms of *halakhah* (Jewish law). To this growing body of historical literature and religious statements I wish to add some personal reflections, in light of my own studies, perspective (which is philosophical rather than halakhic), and my experience in inter-religious teaching and encounter.

Korn's essay presents Rambam (Maimonides; 1135-1204) and Menachem Meiri (1249-1310) as two poles of halakhic opinion. Rambam – who lived in Islamic countries and who can have had little if any direct contact and interaction with Christians – clearly ruled that Christianity, contrary to Islam which is fully monotheistic and prohibits even more strictly than Judaism any form of images in worship, constitutes *`avodah zarah* ("foreign worship," but in this context idolatry).^[2] Meiri, on the other hand, who lived in a Christian environment, denied that Christianity is idolatry, despite its Trinitarianism and use of images in worship, and regarded Christianity as well as Islam as constituting *ummot ha-gedurot be-darkhei ha-datot*, "nations constrained by the ways of religion."^[3]

On the other hand, Rambam, for whom religion ultimately has to do less with cult than with affirming the truth,^[4] ruled that one may teach Torah to Christians, who accept the biblical text and affirm it as divinely revealed, but not to Muslims, who reject the text and deny its revealed authority.^[5]

This brings us to a critical point: shared Scripture, which is the basis of what is often referred to as "the Judeo-Christian tradition," although there is probably as much rejection of this concept of a common tradition (at least on the Jewish side) as there is affirmation of it. But it is precisely shared Scripture which is the problem, because on the one hand the two communities have frequently interpreted that Scripture so radically differently that it became yet another point of controversy, and was a major sore point in the Jewish-Christian polemical relationship over the centuries. On the other hand, although there surely was and remains significant disagreement regarding the meaning of the shared Scripture, the mere fact that both communities define and base themselves on shared Scripture means that they have a special and unique relationship that neither has with any other community. Pope John Paul II was probably correct when, instead of referring to Christianity as a "daughter" religion of Judaism, he referred to the Jewish-Christian relationship as "elder and younger brothers." It is not merely that Jews and Christians can learn valuable insights from each other's tradition of exegesis, nor is it merely that Christians can and need to learn about Jesus the Jew in order to understand better their own belief in Jesus as Christ. Increasingly, and certainly since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and exponentially expanding research into Jewish life in late Second Temple times, Jews can learn from the New Testament and other non-canonical early Christian literature much more about the rich diversity of Jewish life in that period and the eventual evolution of what was to become normative rabbinic Judaism. In short, in both historical and existential senses, the more we learn not only **about** the other but **with** the other, the more we will ultimately learn about ourselves.

In that context, let me state a *mea culpa*. There is an anomaly in how the Roman Catholic Church relates institutionally since Vatican II with Judaism and with Islam. The Commission for relations with Islam comes under the Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians, whereas the “Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews” comes under the “Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.”^[6] For years I found this organizational anomaly insulting, and understood it to mean that the Catholic Church recognizes Islam as an independent religion, but does not extend such recognition to Judaism. In more recent years, however, especially with the phenomenal outreach of Pope John Paul II to the Jewish people in general, and to the State of Israel in particular, which is all the more significant for the fact that he was fundamentally a thoroughly conservative pope, I came to understand that what I had taken as an insult may actually have been intended as a compliment: in Christian eyes, at least in such Christian eyes, which repudiate age-old supersessionism, Judaism is not an alien religion; rather, there is a special, indeed unique relationship, between the two, going back to shared Scripture (however differently understood and lived), and the simple fact that Jesus was a Jew.

Permit me to recount a story from 1972, when I flew from Israel to the U.S.A. to conduct Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur services in a synagogue in Boston. At that time there had already been hijackings of airplanes, but the kind of electronic and x-ray devices now found at every airport had not yet been invented, and all bags were opened and checked by hand. In the Boston airport I waited in line for my bags to be inspected. Since my carry-on bag had a *Shofar* wrapped in a cloth, and it is roughly the size and shape of a pistol, I cautioned the guard not to be alarmed, because it wasn't a gun but a ram's horn. Now of course not too many travellers carry ram's horns with them. So I explained to the guard that I am a Jew and had come from Jerusalem for the Jewish new year, and that we blow the ram's horn as part of our ceremonies. He seemed to be interested and showed me respect. The problem was that the inspection desk wasn't placed in the right area, and the restrooms were outside the restricted security area. I still had some time before my flight, and had to go to the bathroom. Not wanting to be delayed once again by the inspection, I asked the guard if I could leave my bags with him – which of course is a violation of the most basic security precautions. He told me that this was strictly forbidden, but that for me (a Jew from Jerusalem with a ram's horn) he'd make an exception. When I returned a few minutes later, the two guards – one of whom had a Spanish name tag and the other an Irish name tag, so they were both clearly Catholics – were arguing, each one saying: “You ask him.” Finally, the older of them said to me: “He says that you Jews don't believe in Jesus, and I said that of course the Jews believe in Jesus, because Jesus was a Jew. So who is right?” I informed him that the other guard was right, and that Jews do not believe in Jesus. At that point I hoped to proceed to my flight. But the older guard said to me: “Wait a minute. Why not?” To which I replied, “You don't have to have a reason not to believe something; you have to have a reason to believe something. You probably haven't spent a lot of time thinking about why you don't believe in Buddha or Mu'ammad, but you obviously have thought about why you believe in Jesus.” At that point I thought I could go to the gate, but he said again: “Wait a minute; there's a difference.” I asked him: “What's the difference?” To which he replied: “Buddha and Mu'ammad weren't from my country and weren't from my people, so I don't have any way to know about them, but Jesus was from your country and from your people, so you know about him.” At that point I wasn't sure I'd make my flight. But I had the inspiration to point out to him: “You're in Boston. If you drive a few hours west to northern New York State, you'll be in the area where 150 years ago Joseph Smith was preaching his new religion, but you obviously aren't a Mormon and don't believe that Smith was a prophet – but he was from your country and was one of your people.” At which point, the guard laughed and said to me: “Have a nice flight.”^[7]

The point is clear: even this simple Christian believer, who may not have had any higher education, knew that Jesus was a Jew and that he and I, in some way, had a relationship that is not shared with Muslims or Buddhists or others. That relationship, however, is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, proximity and shared texts and language; on the other hand, potential tension and animosity over those shared texts and language, with the implicit – but historically all too frequently

explicit – argument over the acceptance or rejection of Jesus as the Christ, precisely because Jesus was a Jew.

And so Judaism and Christianity have a unique – although by no means exclusive – relationship. In that regard, I believe that Franz Rosenzweig was fundamentally in error in his *Stern der Erlösung* (*Star of Redemption*), when he posited Judaism as the “eternal life” of the core of the star, and Christianity as the rays of the star lighting the pagan darkness, and therefore the “eternal way” for non-Jews. It is not the prerogative of Jews to determine that Christianity is the only and eternal way for non-Jews. Yes, we have a special and unique relationship – but no, non-Jews have to find their own way, and if increasingly today Christians themselves are re-evaluating the classical claims of “one way” and “no one comes to the father except by me” and even “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,” Jews obviously cannot grant exclusive recognition to Christianity.[\[8\]](#)

I first studied Rosenzweig’s thought with Nahum Glatzer, who had been a young associate of Rosenzweig, and who continued to admire his thought and heroic struggle with increasing paralysis from A.L.S.[\[9\]](#) One day, as Glatzer and I walked across the campus, I asked him whether there was any logic to Rosenzweig’s exclusive view of Christianity, or whether it merely reflected his biography (and his earlier flirtation with conversion to Christianity). Glatzer responded unequivocally that it was merely a biographical quirk. Conversely, some current Rosenzweig scholars understand Rosenzweig’s view of Christianity as “the eternal way” in a negative sense: Whereas Judaism is eternal life with God, Christianity is always on the way, meaning that it never reaches its goal.

Whoever is correct about Rosenzweig – whether my understanding, in light of Glatzer, is correct, that Rosenzweig assigned an exclusive, positive role to Christianity, or whether his assessment of Christianity was fundamentally negative – it seems to me that contemporary Jewish thinkers who enthusiastically engage in dialogue with Christians, need to be careful not to be carried away by their enthusiasm (which I share) and fall into Rosenzweig’s trap. For Christians to maintain some kind of dual covenant theology, by which they affirm the continued validity of the Jewish covenant and repudiate the centuries-long supersessionism and “one way” theology that characterized so much of Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism, is both progressive and a fundamental step in Christian-Jewish reconciliation and a growing positive relationship. For Jews to maintain some kind of dual covenant, as maintained in his day by Rosenzweig and more recently by such thinkers as Irving “Yitz” Greenberg,[\[10\]](#) seems to me to be totally invalid and illegitimate. Jewish relations with Christianity may be unique, but they cannot be exclusive, and we Jews have no right to suggest that Christianity is a better choice, let alone the only legitimate choice, for non-Jews. If we Jews do not wish non-Jews to interfere in our internal affairs and choices, we certainly cannot interfere with the internal choices of others.[\[11\]](#)

Non-interference was a central point made by the late Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik (1903-1993), perhaps the outstanding leader of what is often called “modern” or “centrist” Jewish Orthodoxy (as opposed to “sectarian” or “ultra-Orthodoxy”), and who may well have ordained more rabbis than any other rabbi in Jewish history. In 1964, he published an essay “Confrontation,” that has widely been understood by his followers as limiting Jewish-Christian relations to matters of practical cooperation and as opposing theological dialogue.[\[12\]](#) However, as at least one of his students involved in Jewish-Christian theological dialogue has testified, their teacher knew and approved of their activity.[\[13\]](#) More important, his own seminal theological essay, “The Lonely Man of Faith,”[\[14\]](#) was originally delivered to a Roman Catholic audience at St. John’s Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts in 1964.[\[15\]](#)

In “Confrontation” Soloveitchik laid down four conditions he considered essential for a democratic confrontation of religions that would preserve their equality and individuality:

1. Faith communities are totally independent. On the level of faith, they are incommensurable, and

their inherent worth cannot be measured by external standards.

2. The “logos,” the word of religious experience, is unique and incomprehensible to those outside (and all too often to those inside) the faith community. To use the other’s language is to lose one’s individuality and distinctiveness.

3. Faith communities must maintain a policy of non-interference with each other, and refrain from suggesting to the other changes in ritual or emendation of texts.

4. Finally, history has not authorized us to make revisions for the sake of our relations with others.

At roughly the same point in history, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), who actively played an advisory role at Vatican II, published a very different approach to dialogue in his famous essay “No Religion Is An Island,” originally delivered as the inaugural address at Union Theological Seminary in 1965.[\[16\]](#) The very title of the essay speaks for itself.

As mentioned above, Jewish relations with Christianity may be unique, but they cannot be exclusive. Claims of religious exclusivism remain a sore point in inter-religious relations.[\[17\]](#) However, in some regards, exclusivism may be in the eye of the beholder. Judaism has often been portrayed by Christians as particularistic and exclusivistic, in contrast with Christian universalism and inclusivism: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, RSV). Judaism certainly is particularist and exclusivist regarding this world, in which the covenantal obligations of the Torah apply only to the people of Israel, whereas non-Jews are obligated by the “seven Noachide commandments.” However, when it comes to the future realm, there is wide Jewish acceptance of the principle that *?asidei umot ha-`olam yesh la-hem ?eleq la-`olam ha-ba* – the righteous of all the world’s nations have a portion in the world to come.[\[18\]](#) So rabbinic Judaism tends to be particularistic and exclusivist regarding this world, and universalist and inclusive regarding the world to come. Christianity, by contrast, clearly claims and hopes to be “catholic,” i.e., universal and inclusive in this world, but has claimed for much of its history a particularistic and exclusivist view of the world to come, since “Jesus said to him: I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father but by me” (John 14:6, RSV).

Fortunately for Jewish-Christian relations, such passages have been subject to rethinking and reinterpretation by many believing Christians, especially since Vatican II (which also spurred many Protestant churches to re-examine their doctrines), and among Evangelicals, especially since Israel’s reunification of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War.

In that context, and having referred above to the changes brought about in Roman Catholicism by Vatican II, we need to consider two Protestant statements on Jewish-Christian relations which, in turn, should challenge contemporary Jews to rethink their own attitudes towards Christianity.

Konrad Raiser, a former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, summarized the issue of shared Scripture vs. supersessionism concisely:[\[19\]](#)

The obvious question [is] whether the **appropriation** of an important part of the Torah by a Christian assembly, particularly outside its Jewish and specific historical context, is legitimate, and how such reinterpretation can be done without continuing the history of Christian **expropriation** of the traditions of the Jewish people.

The issue of irreconcilable differences between Jews and Christians in relation to the need for dialogue and mutual respect from an Evangelical perspective was raised in a remarkable statement by Jerry Falwell, a Baptist pastor and founder of a conservative political movement, “The Moral Majority,” whose religious and political views were often opposed by the largely liberal American Jewish community:[20]

Several obstacles hinder an open dialogue between Conservative, Evangelical Protestant Christians and the Jewish community. The Jews very understandably look at the Evangelistic commitments of the Conservative Church as obnoxious. At the same time, Evangelicals and Fundamentalists feel that we have a commission from the Lord Jesus Christ to share the Gospel with every person in our generation . . . In my opinion, these obstacles can be overcome without theological compromise if both parties are willing to accept the other as they are and not as we wish they were . . . We must be willing to sit down as citizens of the universe whose futures are clearly interwoven and interdependent, and decide that either we hang together or we hang separately.[21]

And if we Jews have been witnessing in the last generation fundamental changes in the ways many Christians view Jews and Judaism, we should also reconsider the ways in which so many Jews have viewed, and still view, Christians and Christianity. Let us recall that Judah Halevi, whose fiercely nationalist and Zionist Jewish philosophy remains both inspirational and troubling nearly 900 years later, adopted (perhaps consciously) Paul’s parable of the olive tree (Romans 11) in reference to Christianity and Islam: “The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. In the same manner, the religion of Moses transforms each one who honestly follows it, even if he apparently rejects it. **These communities are a preparation and introduction for the hoped-for messiah.**”[22]

Similarly, Rambam, whose thought in many respects is the antithesis of Judah Halevi’s, and who clearly ruled that Christianity is idolatrous, and that Islam, though monotheism, is erroneous, could also write at the end of his *Mishneh Torah* (Code of Jewish Law): “All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Muhammad) who came after him, only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord.”[23]

What we need, then, is to cultivate the special and unique – but not exclusive – relationship between Judaism and Christianity, not with the hope of eliminating our differences, but of enhancing them by greater mutual understanding and respect, while at the same time rejecting a “dual covenant” applicable only to our two communities. In short, what we need is pluralism.

Finally, in Jerome Chanes’ review of *Jewish Theology and World Religions*,[24] he argues that our use of the term “pluralism” is ambiguous, misused and misapplied, because “pluralism, a uniquely American phenomenon, is the calibrating and balancing of the needs of majorities, minorities, individuals and the state. . . Pluralism does not characterize the condition of world religions.” Instead, he refers to “the desired co-existence of differing traditions.”

Since I am one of the Jews who actively argues for religious pluralism (both external and internal, i.e., both inter-religious and intra-religious), I beg to differ. But of course the question also comes down to what is meant by “co-existence.” In its negative sense, “co-existence” was used to describe the tense relationship in the Cold War between the Communist countries and the western democracies, a co-existence guaranteed by the doctrine of “Mutually Assured Destruction”

(M.A.D.) by nuclear weapons.

However, there is also a positive sense of “co-existence,” which is quite compatible with and even essential for the kind of religious pluralism people like me advocate. For Martin Buber, communities as well as individuals must live in relation, in which the “I” and the “You” encounter each other as equals, without eliminating the essential distance between them and their distinct identities. Prior to Buber, Hermann Cohen followed Moses Mendelssohn in understanding Leviticus 19:18, *ve-ahavta le-re`akha kamokha* not as meaning “love your fellow as yourself” but “love your fellow because he is *kamokha*, like you,” a human being created in the divine image.^[25] This insight, then, made possible Cohen’s challenge that we convert the *Nebenmensch*, the person next to us, into the *Mitmensch*, the person with us. And if we can do this as individuals, we should also be able to do this as religious communities and as nations.

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