



in cooperation with
University of Manchester Centre for Jewish Studies

International Conference, Manchester, July 1- July 4, 2012

New Neighbours, New Opportunities
The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility

Wednesday, July 4, 2012

Workshop No. 17

New Research Important for Jewish-Christian Dialogue:
Jewish Theologies of Christianity

by Ruth Langer

Twelve years ago, when *Dabru Emet* was issued, there had been few contemporary attempts to develop a coherent Jewish theology of Christianity that responded to the new realities of dialogue. Jewish participation in this new world consisted more of helping Christians think through their problems than in turning the lens inwards to think about Judaism's own teachings. *Dabru Emet* generated two very different works. *Christianity in Jewish Terms* asked leading Jewish thinkers to discern how to express elements of Christian theology in terms native to Judaism, with the goal of narrowing the conceptual gap between the two traditions. *Irreconcilable Differences?* pairing Jewish and Christian authors, undertook to do a similar work of explaining but in more accessible fashion. There also emerged a scattering of other volumes, many on individual theological topics, usually offering comparisons, but not really delving deeply into the question of how Judaism constructs a theology of Christianity. A major exception to this generalization is the 2004 volume of Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*.

In the last few years, this situation has begun to change, although of the four volumes I will discuss briefly here, only one is specifically dedicated to "a Jewish theology of Christianity." The other three include discussions of Christianity, but as part of a move to develop a Jewish theology of religions more broadly. That, the authors understand, is a necessary prior step to discerning precisely how to think about Christianity (or other individual religions) in authentically Jewish terms.

Anyone today who seeks grounding in the Jewish sources on other religions should begin with Alan Brill's new two-volume set, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding and Judaism and World Religions*. Brill leaves a presentation of his own thinking for the future. Here, he contextualizes and summarizes a comprehensive range of thinkers, arranged thematically and within that, chronologically, including brief citations. He excludes neither difficult traditional texts nor modern liberal thinkers.

Brill states at the outset that his goal is to enable Jews to know their own sources in their diversity in order to prepare the groundwork for an informed theology of religions, something that he found lacking in *Dabru Emet*. Secondly, he seeks to provide Christians with insights into Jewish thinking. Brill's own voice emerges mostly in his evaluations of these sources – for instance, he does not hesitate to identify which of them he considers “dangerous” or “ghastly” – but he is adamant that the Jewish community needs to own these sources and deal with them as well.

In the first volume, his chapters follow conventional categories for theologies of religions: inclusivist, exclusivist, pluralist and universalist, adding a law-centric view native to Judaism. Thematic chapters follow: on “gentiles,” with separate discussions of idolatry and Jews as a nation; on explanations for why other religions exist; and then a final programmatic chapter on the way forward. In the last, drawing on a trope in contemporary philosophy and theology, he calls for an attitude of hospitality as a mechanism for Jews to move beyond intolerance and fear. Regarding Christianity, he advocates developing a healthier memory of encounter by recalling times when Jews and Christians did get along, not focusing only on the lachrymose aspects of our joint history.

In the second volume, Brill presents Jewish teachings about specific religions. He dedicates three chapters specifically to Christianity. The first focuses on the 20th c. move to understand Christianity as “different” rather than as “a theological opposite.” The second collects and critiques many of the discussions of covenant that began in the 1950's and continues today. The important take-home from this chapter is Brill's discussion of the various incompatible and shifting meanings given this one word, many of which don't work in Jewish tradition. The third chapter considers the contemporary search for commonalities. He concludes with a call for greater Jewish theological sophistication and engagements with topics like Christology, ecclesiology, and Christian eschatology.

While Brill's volumes are invaluable resources, they also succeed in confronting the reader with the confusing complexity of Jewish theology and the enormous challenges of constructing new paths that are authentic yet responsive to our new circumstances.

Brill appropriately includes Michael Kogan's 2008 *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity* in his chapter on pluralist approaches. Kogan spends much of his book reviewing and commenting on various official church statements because, as he states, it is the development of new Christian theologies of Judaism that opens the doors to and creates a mandate for new Jewish thinking about Christianity. He also reviews the thinking of a handful of Jewish theologians who thought positively about Christianity, both medieval and modern. These are obviously less complete studies than Brill's but they are also more accessible.

Kogan's own theology begins by recognizing the inadequacy of applying the Noahide covenant to Christianity, but his theology of pluralism still draws heavily on it as a mechanism by which Jews can acknowledge God's truth within all religions, beginning with Christianity. He understands Christianity to be an expression of God's will in bringing blessing to the gentile world. In this, he looks deeply to the Abrahamic covenant.

However, this is the Abrahamic covenant as defined by Paul and Christianity – i.e., it excludes circumcision and the promise of the land which are crucial to Jewish understandings. Therefore, the Jewish covenant that Kogan wants to “open” is not really that which defines Judaism. His Judaism is also fundamentally biblical rather than rabbinic. This leaves his thesis a rather unremarkable way of validating Christianity. Particularly when

reading this book and Brill's together, one senses that Kogan has glossed over too many complexities in order to achieve a predetermined if laudable goal. At the same time, his book is accessible and his overviews of his selected sources and contemporary changes mean I would consider teaching with this volume.

The fourth volume, *Jewish Theology and World Religions* just appeared but represents a decade's process, beginning with conferences in 2003 and conversations before that reflecting on *Dabru Emet* and its limitations. This text too is working towards articulations of a Jewish Theology of Religions, but as a conference volume, it presents multiple voices. Its essays appear in three sections: discussions of religious pluralism from philosophical perspectives; essays on religious otherness; and then essays on specific world religions. It also includes a lengthy but seminal introductory essay framing the issues as well as a briefer concluding synthesis of themes raised in the volume by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, the primary convener of the project and co-editor of the volume along with Eugene Korn. This introduction clearly lays out fundamental issues that a contemporary pluralist Jewish theology of religions must resolve: the validity of other religions; an understanding of the category of idolatry (*avodah zarah*); whether revelation and truth are co-extensive categories; and how these impact concerns for Jewish continuity and identity. In this, as well as in the various other more philosophical/theoretical essays in the volume, Christianity is a frequent though not exclusive interlocutor.

The chapters on Christianity itself are perhaps less exciting than much of the rest of the volume. The first, by Eugene Korn, has largely appeared elsewhere in the interim, though with slightly different emphases. Like most, he begins with the Noahide covenant – and he presents this as evidence that Judaism is quite comfortable with a double-covenant theology. He surveys the rabbinic positions through the generations regarding whether Christian practice is idolatrous, and points out that these opinions were largely shaped by historical context. Thus, as Jews received greater acceptance, there was a trend towards understanding Christian practice as idolatrous for Jews but not for Christians. Today's context also shapes Jewish halakhic responses. While Christian teachings recognizing Jews and Judaism open the door to positive Jewish theologies, the more recent hostile responses to Israel that embed within them anti-Semitic teachings instead raise Jewish suspicions. He concludes by addressing the issue of covenant again: Jews can't understand Christians as partners in the Sinai covenant because Christians do not live according to it. But Jews can affirm that Christianity exceeds being merely Noahide, so a Jewish understanding of Christians as partners in the Abrahamic covenant does work. Is this Kogan's conclusion? In some ways, yes, (and I have the same questions about it) but Korn offers a much more sophisticated integration of halakhah and theology.

The second essay on Christianity is a complex discussion by David Novak on "Maimonides' Treatment of Christianity and its Normative Implications." Here Novak juxtaposes Maimonides' conflicting statements on Christianity, and by contextualizing and analyzing them, tries to discern what his final statement was. The bottom line, he suggests, is that Maimonides towards the end of his life moved from considering Christians idolaters to understanding them as resident aliens in the Jewish community to whom one is allowed to teach Torah. Novak suggests that this may be understood to justify Jewish-Christian dialogue halakhically today. While this is a valuable contribution to Jewish thinking about the dialogue with Christianity, the article is pitched to be accessible only by those familiar with the methods of halakhic thinking.

Joseph Soloveitchik's prohibition of theological dialogue is one of the issues that lurks for halakhic Jews today as they are drawn into the dialogue. By constructing theologies of religions and engaging carefully with authoritative texts of Jewish tradition, these authors seek openings towards a future of engaged participation in our world of religious pluralism, most easily with Christians.