

God Between Christians and Jews – Is it the Same God?

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One possible starting point for an exploration of whether Jews and Christians believe in the same God is actually by examining different Jewish understandings of God. The fact is that there is no single Jewish understanding of God. Different periods and different schools have thought of God and approached him in various ways. This diversity is an important resource for developing a Jewish approach to the Christian God. In part, certain views found within various strands of the Jewish tradition help narrow the gap between what might otherwise seem like completely incompatible views of God. From another perspective, the very diversity of Jewish views of God points to theological flexibility and accommodation. Differing views of God can coexist, with an implied understanding that it is the same God to which the various approaches point, despite their obvious differences. If such theological flexibility exists, why cannot the Christian God be recognized as one further expression of a Jewish approach to God. This is precisely where the “same God” issue becomes the subject of discussion. Has the Christian view of God moved beyond the pale of Jewish theological flexibility, thereby making the Christian God an “other god”, or can Judaism recognize that Christians worship the same God, despite whatever theological differences exist?

Judaism’s only “statement” on Christianity provides us with a convenient way to begin our exploration. *Dabru Emet* is a statement on Christianity, published in the year

2000, by a team of Jewish scholars, in response to ongoing changes in the Christian churches in relation to Judaism. It is an attempt to reciprocate various Christian statements on Jews and Judaism and is the first and only such attempt. The opening clause of *Dabru Emet* states: "Jews and Christians worship the same God". The description of Judaism and Christianity as worshiping the same God is disarmingly deceptive in its simplicity. Certainly to a Christian audience the point is obvious enough. Christian espousal of the Hebrew Bible leads naturally to the understanding that both parts of the Christian canon refer to the same God, even if what is known of God may have developed from one testament to the other. However, from a Jewish perspective this position is not self evident. Indeed, for this reason the statement was included in *Dabru Emet*, and featured as its opening proposition. It is a position that must be constructed, rather than simply presented as a given of the Jewish attitude to Christianity. What follows is an attempt to explore and reveal some of the assumptions and choices, involved in making *Dabru Emet's* opening proposition.

Recognizing the Same God - The Problem of Avoda Zara

The same God discussion is a novel discussion. For most of Jewish history Jews either knew, or assumed, that their God was different from the gods of other people, or recognized that another religion worships God. While such recognition was rarely formulated in terms of the "same God", the question is actually the flip side of the foundational biblical perspective, forbidding the worship of other gods. "Other gods" is how the ten commandments refer to gods of other religions. In a polytheistic or henotheistic context, reference to other gods is self evident, and the issue of "same God" does not even

arise. It requires further theological evolution, and the clear recognition of a single divine presence to raise the question of the same God.

The “same God” discussion remains implicit in the formative stages of Jewish literature. The biblical reference to other gods gave way to another way of conceptualizing relations with other religions, developed in the rabbinic period. The rabbinic formulation, by means of which attitudes to other religions and their gods have been established is in terms of the status of those religions as *Avoda Zara*. *Avoda Zara* is the formative category by means of which rabbinic literature assesses its attitudes to other religions and forms of worship. Literally the term means “foreign worship”, designating the worship of foreign gods. While the term does not explicitly refer to idols, the objects of worship, but rather focuses upon the human act of worship, it is functionally equivalent to idolatry. The adequate translation of *Avoda Zara* lies somewhere between idolatry and false worship. Jewish tradition, and in particular the legal tradition, the halacha, that defines the contours of practical relations between Jews and people of other religions, has focused for the most part on the status of other religions as *Avoda Zara*. Framing the question in terms of *Avoda Zara* removes us one step from the “same God” question, that was closer to the surface in the biblical formulation of “other gods”. The present discussion will revisit the issue of *Avoda Zara* through the “same God” lens, thereby bridging the gap between biblical and rabbinic formulations. It seeks to approach explicitly what for the most part remains implicit in both biblical and rabbinic approaches to other religions.

The present discussion focuses on the same God question, from a Jewish perspective, in relation to Christianity. It allows us to tackle age old questions from a fresh angle. Discussions of Christianity have taken place through the category of *Avoda Zara*. In

examining these discussions in light of the “same God” question, we may discover full or partial overlap between the issue of *Avoda Zara* and the same God question. The same God question can conceivably uncover the implicit assumptions of a discussion of *Avoda Zara*, provide a counterpoint to it or redefine it, leading to novel views of *Avoda Zara*, in light of the same God question. It is thus a very helpful heuristic device, by means of which age old questions of *Avoda Zara* may be revisited, appreciated anew and possibly redefined. With reference to Christianity, the differences between alternative rabbinic positions could perhaps be accounted for in light of different views of the same God question. Our choices between various options that the rabbinic tradition presents us with become clearer when these are viewed through the lens of the same God question. It will therefore be helpful to enter the discussion of whether Judaism and Christianity worship the same God by revisiting the traditional Jewish formulation of the question of Christianity’s status as *Avoda Zara*. In the process, we may expect a rich dialectic. The same God discussion will be informed by the discussion of *Avoda Zara*, while at the same time it could provide new perspectives, that could in turn redefine the concept or the practical applications of *Avoda Zara*, in relation to Christianity.

In traditional Jewish literature, expressed in the halacha, the governing question was whether Christianity is to be considered *Avoda Zara*. During the formative early rabbinic period, when the key concepts defining *Avoda Zara* were developed, Christianity was not yet one of the other religions, the validity of which Judaism had to assess in these terms. The consideration of Christianity in these rabbinic terms was primarily the work of halachic authorities of the middle ages. The decision as to whether Christianity should or should not be considered *Avoda Zara* would have far-reaching ramifications on the daily

life of Jews in Christian society. If Christianity would be considered *Avoda Zara*, the strict application of Talmudic law concerning commerce with idolaters would effectively preclude any possibility of commerce, hence of making a livelihood, in a Christian milieu. The definition of Christianity in this context was thus not a purely theological matter, but also a matter of developing strategies for Jewish survival.

The question of the halachic status of Christianity, in terms of *Avoda Zara*, is twofold. Strictly speaking, what is under discussion is whether a Trinitarian understanding of God constitutes the kind of theological error that would lead to considering Christianity as *Avoda Zara*. In addition, Christian use of images in worship plays significantly into the question, informing both attitudes and positions vis a vis Christianity. The outward resemblance of forms of Christian worship and forms of worship typical of biblical and rabbinic idolatry enhances the perception of Christianity as *Avoda Zara*.

There is no single unequivocal position regarding Judaism's view of Christianity in terms of *Avoda Zara*. A range of possibilities was formulated throughout Judaism's rich history of contact with Christianity. This range is reflected in the diversity of halachic approaches to Christianity down to present times. Clearly, the establishment of the state of Israel and the need to determine fundamental issues pertaining to other religions should have been the occasion for a systematic formulation of Judaism's attitude to other religions, including Christianity. Such a challenge has not been met in more than half a century of renewed Jewish life in Israel. A serious systematic reexamination of the topic, in light of a range of considerations - historical, sociological and theological - seems overdue.

Positions on the question of the halachic definition of Christianity as *Avoda Zara* diverge. Maimonides is the classical point of reference for considering Christianity as *Avoda*

Zara. His enormous prestige, coupled at times with distance and lack of direct contact with Christianity, are among the factors for this position often appearing as the default Jewish position. An examination of contemporary rabbinic writings reveals how common the maimonidean view of Christianity as *Avoda Zara* is, usually with little attention going into the matter, beyond the evocation of the maimonidean position as self evident.

Actually, it is far from clear what the reasoning for Maimonides' position on Christianity is. Maimonides offers this ruling in several places, but does not really attempt to explain the theological or other error involved. Scholars are thus forced to conjecture what are the grounds for his declaration of Christianity as *Avoda Zara* and how these cohere with his broader worldview. Some scholars emphasize the philosophical/theological error involved in a Trinitarian view of the divinity. For Maimonides, "getting it right" theologically was of the utmost importance. Proper theological formulation was, for him, a condition for entry into the world to come. Hence the Maimonidean opposition to a range of theological misconceptions, assessed from the absolute vantage point of his philosophical world view. This same world view would be damning to many forms of Judaism, especially the kabbalistic tradition. That many of the halachic authorities who adopt the Maimonidean view of Christianity also believe in Jewish doctrines that would have not received Maimonides' approval is testimony to the multiple forces that have shaped Jewish faith and halacha. In this case, positions were not shaped by the quest for theological consistency, as much as by the difference in attitude towards internal theological developments and the instinctive estrangement from the religion of the oppressive other.

If a wrong view of God is considered *Avoda Zara*, we may still be able to draw a distinction between the identity of the God and the correct view of Him. Such a distinction would have particular power in the case of Maimonides, as it would apply equally to wrong Jewish views of God and to wrong non-Jewish notions. According to this reasoning, even if Christianity is considered *Avoda Zara*, by the personality who more than any other represents this position, this need not imply that Christians and Jews do not worship the same God.

My own reading of Maimonides, however, is different. In my view, the most likely reason for considering Christianity as *Avoda Zara* is that another being, other than God, is worshipped. For Maimonides, Laws of Avoda Zara 2,1 this is the core definition of *Avoda Zara*. This definition would put the same God question right at the heart of discussion. If so, *Avoda Zara* and the same God question would overlap, leading to the conclusion that the Christian God is another god.

However, even this conclusion may be overstated. For one, it may be a different God *in part*. As we shall see below, Maimonides may implicitly acknowledge the Christian knowledge of God is valid. If so, same God and *Avoda Zara* operate under different premises. For a religion to be free of *Avoda Zara*, it must be *fully* clear of it. Such a high standard of expectation is commensurate with Maimonides' overall high theological standard. But even if it is not deemed "clear" or "clean" of *Avoda Zara*, it may nevertheless appeal to the same God. The same God may be known partially, while *Avoda Zara* requires full removal of theological or ritual imperfection. Returning to the affirmation of *Dabru Emet*, it may be that the sameness of the Christian and the Jewish God could be upheld even in spite of Maimonides' declaration of Christianity as *Avoda Zara*.

Other lines of reasoning could lead to a similar conclusion. *Avoda Zara* could be understood as an expression of wrong worship, a false approach to God. Such an understanding would obviously highlight inappropriate forms of worship - images, stones or human beings. However, even if the form of worship is mistaken or forbidden, this need not impact on the identity of the God worshipped, only on the means by which He is worshipped. It is telling that when Maimonides narrates how *Avoda Zara* came into the world, in the first Chapter of the Laws of *Avoda Zara*, he describes it as a function of a mistaken understanding of the will of God. Thus, God was worshiped in a wrong form, by giving honor to other beings. False worship can thus coexist with what is ultimately a correct identity of God. If so, we may legitimately distinguish the same God question from the question of *Avoda Zara*.

Support for distinguishing between the two questions may be brought from Maimonides himself. In a famous responsum, Maimonides permits the teaching of Torah to Christians, while upholding the talmudic prohibition of teaching Torah to non Jews in relation to Islam. The reason Maimonides offers is that Christians believe in the same revelation as us, and will therefore treat the Torah taught them respectfully, whereas Muslims do not show the same respect to our Scriptures, claiming they have been falsified. Now, the acknowledgment of the validity of revelation is not simply a respectful attitude. It is a theological statement, involving a sense of who God is, the fact that He addresses us and what His revelation consists of. To claim that Christians recognize the same revelation as us and that their recognition is of halachic consequence is also to make a statement concerning the faith that Christians have in the same revealing God. Maimonides' ruling is thus tantamount to recognition of a common faith in God in Judaism and Christianity.

The distinction between the question of *Avoda Zara* and the same God question is of great significance. On the face of it, if Christianity is considered *Avoda Zara*, this implies that Jews and Christians cannot speak of the same God. Indeed, one can trace in halachic discourse that considers Christianity to be *Avoda Zara* the kind of distance and disdain that could not be entertained had the writers considered the Jewish God and the Christian God as one and the same. In terms of attitude, it is clear that the declaration of *Avoda Zara* and the sense of otherness in relation to the other religion's god do go hand in hand. Distinguishing between these two issues could open a space for recognition and respect for Christianity, even while upholding a variety of practical stringencies arising from the recognition that in technical and legal terms it is *Avoda Zara*. The possibility that Maimonides can be enlisted in support of such a distinction is particularly significant. If Maimonides conditions much of present day halachic attitudes to Christianity, in ways that would seem to be negative and not supportive of respect and tolerance, the recognition that his rulings allow us to draw the distinction between the question of *Avoda Zara* and the same God question is very significant for contemporary relations. Entering the discussion through the same-God portal significantly narrows down the gap between Maimonides and the halachic authorities we are about to discuss, who consider that it is permissible for non-Jews to worship God alongside other beings. From the perspective of *Avoda Zara* there is a radical difference between them, with the Maimonidean position leading to rejection of the legitimacy of Christianity. Seen, however, from the perspective of the same-God question the gap between these positions may disappear. Both positions may be able to recognize that the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity are one and the

same. Let us, then, turn to an examination of the position typically considered as the alternative to Maimonides'.

The position considered alternative to Maimonides' position was formed initially as a response to practical demands, arising out of the financial needs of Jews living in Christian lands. Over time it evolved into a principled position with regard to Christianity. The position, usually associated with the 12th century figure of Rabbenu Tam, considers the Christian God in terms of the rabbinic category of *Shituf*, association. One must not worship another being alongside God. However, argues Rabbenu Tam, the prohibition against *Shituf*, the worship of another being alongside God, applies only to Jews. Non-Jews are not prohibited from such worship. Therefore, the worship of another being, Jesus, alongside the biblical God, does not violate the norms by which non-Jews are expected to act, according to halacha. The upshot of this position is that restrictions that would apply had Christianity been considered *Avoda Zara* do not apply. Presumably, the underlying theological understanding is that compromising absolute monotheistic understanding of God is permitted to non-Jews, as long as one does not lose contact with the worship of the One God. Jews, by contrast, are commanded to a higher or stricter monotheistic norm, according to which no other being may be worshipped alongside God.

By the eighteenth century, the position that non-Jews are not prohibited from worshipping God in association with other beings had become a principled acceptance of Christianity as a valid religion. What started out as a mechanism for solving a specific legal problem involving financial transactions with Christians became a principled recognition of the legitimacy of Christianity. Christianity was religiously legitimate and was not considered as *Avoda Zara*, because Judaism could not fault the Christian understanding of

God as valid for Christian believers. The move was a brilliant one. This position recognized the legitimacy of Christianity for non-Jews. For Jews, however, it was considered invalid, as they were prohibited from worshipping God alongside another being. Tolerance of the other and protection of one's own from the dangers of Christianity were thus achieved through the same theological move.

Contemporary rabbinic discussions oscillate between the positions of Maimonides and Rabbenu Tam. One of the problems for a contemporary Jewish view of the Christian God is the lack of a single considered Jewish position concerning the Christian God. Needless to say, the fundamental attitude to Christianity changes radically if it is considered *Avoda Zara* or not. As mentioned, one of the implications of considering Christianity as *Avoda Zara* is that a distance is kept from it, in practical as well as in theological, emotional and other senses. This distance is not necessarily bridged if *Shituf* is considered permitted. Much depends on how the permissibility of *Shituf* is understood, on the one hand, and on the relationship of *Shituf* to the same God question. *Shituf* may be understood either as non idolatrous or as a form of idolatry permissible for non Jews. Positions on these issues need not overlap and may be variously configured. One possible aligning of positions would be that if *Shituf* is not *Avoda Zara*, then indeed Jews and Christians do worship the same God, even if Christians understand that God differently. If so, *Shituf* refers to the means of approaching the same God. Jews and Christians differ in their use of means, but the end is the same. According to this way of parsing the question, *Avoda Zara* overlaps with same God question, and from both perspectives Christianity is viewed positively.

If we continue to align the positions, what of the understanding that *Shituf* is a form of permitted *Avoda Zara*? Declaring *Shituf* a form of *Avoda Zara* does not necessarily preclude recognition of the same God. After all, permissibility of *Shituf* is founded upon such recognition. If despite such recognition, Christianity is considered *Avoda Zara*, even if permissible for non-Jews, one would be forced to conclude that Christians worship the same God, but approach Him through the worship of others - an approach that even if permissible is not free of the taint of *Avoda Zara*. Accordingly, Jews and Christians could be said to worship the same God *in part*.

Because the question of *Avoda Zara* has not been explored classically through the lens of the same God question, authorities who affirmed Christianity's legitimacy never framed its recognition in such partial terms. Nevertheless, the strategies for recognizing Christianity do appeal to same God arguments, and they do so precisely *in part*, that is by affirming certain aspects of the Christian recognition of God, rather than others. Legitimizers of Christianity on the grounds of the permissibility of *Shituf* for non-Jews have to, in some way, emphasize the identity of the one God, by highlighting certain features of the common understanding of God, at the expense of the particularly unique Christian doctrine. Thus, creation, providence and revelation are some of the doctrines that are suggested as common theological ground, supporting faith in the same God. Let us look how such affirmation is achieved in greater detail.

The rabbinic authorities that uphold the permissibility of *Shituf* and who recognize Christianity resort frequently to the same God argument. While creation forms the basis for the same God argument, it does get expanded in later iterations. The following famed passage from the 17th c. Rabbi Moshe Rivkes makes the point:

What the talmudic rabbis state, in this matter, was only said with reference to the gentiles who were in their own times, who would worship stars and signs and who did not believe in the Exodus and in the creation of the world. But these non Jews in whose shadow we, the Israelite nation dwell and are spread amidst them, they believe in the creation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt and in the principles of faith, and their entire intention is to the maker of heaven and earth...We are obligated to pray for their welfare...David's prayer for God to pour his wrath on the nations who do not know Him (ps. 79,6) refers to the non Jews who do not believe in the creation of the world and the matter of signs and miracles that God did with us in Egypt and in the giving of the Torah. But the nations in whose shadow we live and dwell under their wings, they believe in all these, and we continually pray for the[ir] peace.

This formulation yields several alternative definitions of how one recognizes the same God. God's creative power is surely the clearest distinguishing mark of God's identity. His power to do miracles, His intervention in history, His revelation are all divine identity markers. It may be that belief in a common Scripture itself points to the identity of the God in whom one believes. Thus, not only God's actions but the acceptance of the Scriptures in which His deeds are narrated provide ways of identifying God. We shall return to this point shortly, when we revisit Maimonides' views.

Recognizing the same God, through common religious propositions and faith articles, is a matter of theological choice. Were one to highlight all that is strange, foreign and unacceptable about Christian faith, one would have to forego recognition of the same God. What leads to affirmation rather than rejection of the same God premise is more than the practical social and economic needs that mandate recognizing the two religions as serving the same God. Ultimately, it is the product of religious intuition, whereby religious affinity and commonality is recognized and by means of which the identity of God in both traditions is affirmed. However, this intuition does not stand on its own. Considering this intuition independently might lead us to conclude that Jews and Christians fully worship

the same God. Rather, this intuition drives, and in part complements, a conceptual construct by means of which similarity and difference are simultaneously affirmed. *Shitif* may be indebted to a fundamental religious intuition, but its conceptual work is more complex than this religious intuition. Built into this category is the possibility for affirming similarity and otherness, depending on how one wishes to apply it. It thus calls for a choice, of whether the God of Judaism and Christianity are one and of clear articulation of the theological criteria by means of which such a choice is made.

Recognizing the Same God -Worship and Story

A consideration of Christianity's status as *Avoda Zara* cannot exhaust the question of the identity of the Jewish and Christian God. Halachic discussion leaves the question at hand undecided. Due to the historical exigencies and circumstances of how halachic positions were formulated it may also not offer us the most balanced approach to the question, reflecting as it does more the history of internal Jewish legal thinking than a direct theological assessment of Christianity.

Underlying the discussion of the identity of the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity is a weighty philosophical challenge: recognizing the God of other religions as identical to or as different from the God in whom we (in this instance: as Jews) believe. The discussion above of Christianity's status as *Avoda Zara* relied heavily upon a theological approach to the problem. Maimonides' position has been understood by some readers as based on his philosophical understanding of the problematics of the Trinity, while adherents of the permissibility of *Shituf* appealed to common theological statements, by

means of which the identity of God, as known in both religions, could be established. As suggested above, taking the theological route in order to establish that the same God is worshipped in both religions involves us in selectivity and overlooking certain portions of the faith of the other, while highlighting others.

That the halachic process and its theologizing may yield conflicting results, as our previous discussion indicates, is in part a consequence of the historical and sociological circumstances that gave birth to the various positions of rabbinic authorities. It is, however, also an indication of the problem of establishing the identity of God by means of the halakhic process and particularly through its appeal to philosophical or theological arguments. Halachico-theological analysis is inconclusive because more is involved in religion than theological pronouncements on the nature of God. Proof for this may be found in an examination of halachic attitudes to Islam. Despite the fact that Islam does not raise the same theological difficulties in its understanding of the unity of God that Christianity does, various rabbinic authorities consider it nevertheless to be *Avoda Zara*. This significant minority rabbinic position points to the choices involved in viewing another religion. Highlighting particular aspects of a religion may lead to its consideration as *Avoda Zara*, even if its concept of God is not faulted. Thus, more is involved in the declaration of another religion as *Avoda Zara* than pure theology. A statement that another religion is *Avoda Zara* is more than a theological statement about the nature of the god of another religion. It involves issues of otherness and identity of the religious community, as well as other sociological, cultural and historical considerations. The identity of God in different religions - the same God question - is thus related to some extent to considerations of the identity of the religious community, in relation to other communities. If this is

acknowledged, at least in some cases, then it is clear that more is involved in establishing the identity of God in two religions than theology. The identity of God in different religions can be established only in part through the theological statements made of Him, the attributes assigned to Him and the names by which He is known. In the case of Judaism and Christianity we find alongside similarities also differences in each of these categories.

The nature of the choice involved in establishing the identity of God between religions will become more obvious when we consider the problem of identity of God within the religion, in our case - Judaism. As already stated, there are significant theological differences in the understanding of God between different schools in Judaism. From a strictly substantive or theological perspective, these differences are no less significant than the differences between Judaism and Christianity. However, despite the internal differences between kabbalists and philosophers, we do not find within internal Jewish debates, to the best of my awareness, the charge that a different God is being worshiped, or that one side or the other is guilty of *Avoda Zara*. This leads us to conclude that more is involved in the establishment of the identity or difference of God in different religions than the working out of theological issues. This leads us to a consideration of the means by which God is recognized and acknowledged within Jewish tradition.

A discussion of God in Judaism is inextricably linked with a discussion of ritual and of history. The covenant provides the logic for Israel's story and the framework for worship, from within which God is recognized and approached. Different approaches to God, characteristic of the different periods and schools of Judaism, share in a common story and provide different understandings of a common ritual. The centrality of story and worship is expressed in the ritual of conversion to Judaism. Significantly, the conversion

ritual, by means of which one enters Judaism lacks theological emphasis. The potential convert affirms his or her desire to become part of the people and their commitment to follow the commandments. These are the primary criteria for joining the Jewish people. Story (entry into the people) and ritual (acceptance of the yoke of the commandments) define Jewish identity, rather than theological affirmation. Even though the theological differences between different schools of kabbalists and philosophers may be as significant as the differences between Jewish and Christian teachings of God, the wider context within which these differences are articulated is more significant than the differences themselves. The most appropriate reply to the question: Who is the God of Israel, would thus be: the God who is known through Israel's story and through its worship.

Significantly, as Rabbi Yehuda Halevi has already pointed out, the ten commandments open with the identification of God as the God who took Israel out of Egypt, rather than as the God who created heaven and earth. Story (Israel's redeemer) rather than an attribute (God as creator) provides God's identity. It is the God who liberated Israel from Egypt, who entered a covenantal relation with them, and who continues to be involved in their story. It is the God who commanded a way of life, and who is known and approached through the commandments He gave His people. All theological speculations and definitions are secondary to this primary mode of recognizing God. God is known through relationship and action, and they provide the stability of identity as well as continuity to the diverse forms of historical Judaism. The ultimate reason why various Jewish approaches to God can agree upon the identity of the God they worship, and hence recognize each others as members of the same religion, is that Judaism is not constituted through theological definition. Rabbinic Judaism, philosophical Judaism and the various

strands of kabbalistic Judaism share a common worship. The identity of the God of Judaism is established through this common worship more than through any of the theological statements made by these different Judaisms.

If story and worship establish the identity of the God who is at the center of a religion, the question of the relationship of the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity takes on new dimensions. Instead of a consideration of the relative significance of specific theological proclamations in the overall economy of the religion - God the creator of heaven and earth vs. the triune God - the continuity, or lack thereof, between the Jewish and Christian stories and forms of worship will be the focus of attention. Such a focus not only serves as an important complement and corrective to the classical theological emphasis; it is also more true to the historical causes of the divide between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism and Christianity did not divide over the appropriate understanding of God. The separation between the two religions occurred over two issues - the definition of "Israel", and the continued relevance of the commandments. How "Israel" is defined touches upon the heart of Israel's story and determines what will be considered the next chapter in this ongoing story. Abandonment of the commandments amounts to a change of the entire religious structure, hence the creation of a new religion. If a common worship allows us to recognize diverse theological forms of Judaism as pointing to the same God, the lack of such common form of worship ultimately raises the question of the identity of the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity.

I am convinced that had Judaism and Christianity not parted ways, yielding different religions between which no love was lost, a particular understanding of God, such as the Trinitarian understanding, could have been recognized as part of a wide range of

acceptable Jewish understandings of and approaches to God. Had the faith of Christianity remained true to classical Jewish ritual expression, there would have been little question as to the identity of God being worshiped through this ritual, even if a particular understanding of this God characterized a specific community of believers. Historical research suggests a far greater diversity in the understanding of the one God in late antiquity than is often recognized. Christian understanding could have conceivably developed as one form of Jewish understanding.

This suggestion can be considered not only from the perspective of Judaism in late antiquity, but also from the perspective of the Judaism of the middle ages. In and of itself, the understanding of the triune God, as taught by Christianity, is no more or less acceptable than the teaching of the decaune God - God as manifest through the tenfold *sefirotic* structure, as taught by the Kabbalah. Kabbalah was accepted not because of the inherent appeal or conviction of its teachings, but because of the enormous prestige of the rabbinic authorities who supported and taught it, when it became a historical phenomenon. In other words, beyond the specific teaching lies the wider religious context. The difficulty in the Christian theological position, hence: in the recognition of the Christian God as the same as the God of Judaism, is not exclusively a function of the position itself. It is no less a consequence of the wider context of separation, competition, rejection and hate, in sum: the difference through which the two religions assess each other.

If the context determines as much, perhaps more than theology itself, let us consider the two primary modes of establishing the context of reflection on God - story and ritual, as they impact the question of the identity of the Jewish and Christian God. I begin with ritual and then move on to some thoughts on the commonality of story. The suggestion that God's

identity is established through worship, or perhaps better: through the theological recognition captured in worship, rather than through theological statements, may allow us to approach the question of the identity of the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity from a novel angle. As with the theological approach to the issue, there are multiple perspectives from which the question can be addressed. On the face of it, Christian worship is distinct from Jewish worship. Christianity rejected the Jewish observance of the mitzvot and instituted its own rituals and sacraments, principal among which is the celebration of the Eucharist. On the face of it, then, shifting the ground of discussion from theological doctrine to the common ground of worship is of little help. It would seem that the difference in practice actually increases the sense of difference between the religions, thereby enhancing the sense of otherness, both of Christianity and its God.

While Christian worship has taken on a very different quality from Jewish worship, one may nevertheless point to significant elements of Christian worship that point to the identity of the God that is worshipped with the God of Judaism. Unlike proper theological understanding, regarding which one may argue that imperfect theological understanding may be construed as *Avoda Zara* and hence hamper the recognition of the same God worshipped in both religions, the perspective of worship need not seek full compatibility of worship and its implicit theology. If worship is used to indicate the identity of the God who is worshipped, His identity may be established even if details of worship reflect theological differences. The theological perspective tends to be maximalist, seeking full or significant accord concerning how God is understood. Worship, by contrast, may provide a more minimalist position, seeking to find sufficient common ground in worship to point to the identity of the God approached in Judaism and Christianity.

Despite great differences in Jewish and Christian worship, there are some significant commonalities in their form of worship. Christians often appeal to the commonality in prayer, suggested by the fact that both Jews and Christians express their prayers through the Psalms. Indeed, the Psalms provide Jews and Christians with a common language and text of prayer. If the Psalms alone were considered, one might conclude that this common form of worship does indeed point to a common referent of worship, the one God.

The argument from common worship might be profitably expanded to include not only the Psalms, but the entire Hebrew Bible, acknowledged as part of Christian Scripture. One may argue that the identity of God is established not only through the medium of a common text that addresses God in prayer, but also through the common text, God's word common to both traditions. Accordingly, the fact that both Judaism and Christianity recognize the Bible might allow us to propose a new way of establishing the identity of God in both religions. Both religions recognize the God of the Hebrew Bible. If Jews and Christians share Scripture, they share something fundamental also in the identity of the God who expresses Himself through this same Scripture. This brings us back to the responsum of Maimonides, discussed above. The recognition of shared Scripture between Jews and Christians is deemed religiously significant by Maimonides, and ultimately functions as a same God strategy. As suggested above, Maimonides' use of this strategy should be appreciated against the background of his ruling that Christianity is *Avoda Zara*. If that decision was reached on account of Christian theological views, then we can see clearly where different criteria would lead to different approaches to Christianity. Theological criteria would lead to proclamation of Christianity as *Avoda Zara*, while the

criteria of worship, and possibly story, as these are expressed through common Scripture, allow us to recognize the same God in Judaism and Christianity.

Applying the criterion of common worship as a means of recognizing the same God could be seen as counter intuitive. While elements of worship that are common to Jews and Christians are offered to God, Christian worship is explicitly addressed to Jesus, as God. Hurtado, makes us aware of worship as the decisive moment where legitimate theological diversity turns into religious otherness. The common worship strategy therefore requires a good deal of theological will. Theological minimalism requires not only establishing minimal criteria for recognizing the same God through worship, but also putting aside significant theological differences, as these concern the explicit object of worship.

Returning to Scripture, it can be thought of also as an expression of story. Scripture provides Israel's formative story. Sharing Scripture therefore poses the question of whether there is a way of sharing in Israel's story that might be incorporated into a same-God strategy for recognizing Christianity. God would thus be known as the same God because He is the God of the same unfolding story, the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Israel, known through the Bible and commonly professed by Jews and Christians. One recalls Pascal's famous proclamation of faith - "Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars." Rabbi Yehuda Halevy would have been fully sympathetic to this ascription of God. Pascal here juxtaposes a philosophical or theological means of knowing God with the way in which God is known directly, through an unfolding story. Thus, recognizing the common Scriptural foundations of Judaism and Christianity opens the gate to the recognition of the same God, known from a common story.

In purely theoretical terms, this may be the most effective way of establishing the identity of the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity. It is, however, also the most emotionally charged path and one that could meet with considerable resistance. The reason for this does not lie in the argument itself, but in the broader context of how the stories of Judaism and Christianity have been told for millennia. For the better part of the history of Jewish-Christian relations, Christians have told the biblical story at the expense of Jews. Their identification with the biblical story was made possible, for the most part, by displacing Israel and taking their place in the story. Christians could recognize the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because they had become the true Israel.

For Jews to recognize the God of Christians as their own because of a common story touches on the heart of the Jewish-Christian divide. It is emotionally charged, but also has great theological potential. The past decades have seen a reversal of Christian theology, in most major denominations, leading to a recognition of the enduring value of Israel's relationship with God and its particular story. This breakthrough brings a same-story approach to the same-God problem into the realm of the possible. However, Christian theology has a long way to go in reconciling its own identity as Israel with the enduring identity of the people of Israel as the people of the covenant. Formative declarations, such as *Nostra Aetate* pave the way for important theological work that has yet to take place. It may therefore take time for a same-story strategy to mature, in ways that do not make the Jewish side uncomfortable. From a Jewish perspective, recognizing common Scripture as the foundation for a common story requires developing a broader theological understanding of the role of Christianity within the divine economy and for how it relates to Judaism's ultimate purpose. This theological line of thinking requires much work.

Recognizing a common God through story is best achieved by appeal to the initial common foundations of the story. To look at the foundations of the story, while disregarding its continuation is clearly problematic and involves a conscious turning away from most of Judaism's history with Christianity. Such a strategy therefore requires further theological thinking and advances on both the Jewish and the Christian side.

While the full impact of this strategy may become visible only in the future, it is important to recognize that we possess several precedents for considering Christianity in terms of Judaism's own story. The same Maimonides who recognizes the religious value of common Scripture in relation to Christianity also offers a reading of history in which the global spreading of Christianity paves the way for the ultimate recognition of truth, in messianic times, through the sharing of biblical language, story and concepts. Maimonides does not make the same God argument explicitly, but it is implicit in the recognition of the same story. The same is true for another telling of the Christian story from Jewish eyes. R. Yakov Emden incorporates the story of Jesus and Paul within the Jewish narrative, by presenting them as teachers of the seven noachide commandments, who sought to bring this instruction to all of humanity. Unlike Maimonides, Emden did not consider Christianity to be *Avoda Zara*. If Jesus was a Jewish teacher and Christianity fulfills the obligations of the noachide commandments, the same God issue does not even arise; it is taken for granted.

These two rabbinic authors show that Christianity's story can be incorporated within Judaism's. When such incorporation is coupled with explicit Christian appeal to the common roots of the story, it makes the same story argument as a means for establishing the identity of God credible. The constructs of Emden and Maimonides were meant for internal Jewish purposes and were composed under certain historical conditions. Changes

in historical conditions, and in particular in Christian views of Judaism, raise new challenges with regard to the possibility of incorporating Christianity within Israel's story. While meeting those challenges may require time, it is promising that one of the most effective strategies for recognizing the same God has such precedent within Jewish tradition.

The preceding discussion attempted to suggest certain criteria for recognizing the same God. These criteria are often found alongside the theological criteria, discussed earlier in this paper. In fact, they provide independent tracks to addressing the question. Our discussion suggests that much like the theological criteria themselves, applying these criteria as a means of recognizing the same God requires prior theological will, and relies on intuition and recognition. The appeal to both worship and story does not provide unequivocal proof. Rather, it functions as a way of constructing an argument, for which prior motivation must exist. In my view, the more effective argument is the argument from the same story, an argument that sidesteps theology and that relies on precedent. However, even this argument cannot be taken for granted. It expresses prior attitudes, and may therefore be suitable for those who wish to affirm the same God in both traditions, within the present theological and sociological climate. Still, like all other arguments, it must be constructed. Its contemporary construction constitutes an invitation to continuing theological reflection concerning Judaism's and Christianity's common story.

Recognizing the Same God - Morality and Spiritual Life

The challenge of recognizing the same God behind different religious traditions is wider than the challenge posed within the framework of Jewish-Christian relations. Emphasis upon common worship and common story is appropriate to Judaism's consideration of Christianity, in view of the particular relationship between the two religions. The following consideration is potentially appropriate to all religious traditions, even though it was articulated historically in relation to Christianity. In dealing with the status of Christianity, as well as Islam, from a Jewish perspective, a novel and principled position was marshalled by the 14th century provencal Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri..

Let me introduce Meiri by considering Judaism's attitude to other religions in historical context. This is particularly important for the present focus on the same-God question. The biblical references to other gods and the talmudic references to *Avoda Zara* create a culture of distance and disdain in relation to other religions. This attitude, formulated in response to the religions of antiquity and late antiquity, was, on the whole, transferred into the middle ages, and conditioned Jewish attitudes towards Christianity. However, Christianity, as well as Islam, presented challenges that are unique in the history of Jewish dealings with other religions, both theologically and sociologically. Theologically, no longer was one dealing with other gods, but with other *religions*, that claimed to worship the same God. For the modern observer, who encounters Jewish attitudes to other religions it is often difficult to understand on what grounds Jews could reject either religion, claiming they are *Avoda Zara*, given that they basically believe in the same God. Carrying over the charge of *Avoda Zara* from classical literature to the dealings with Christianity, and even with Islam, is part of the heritage of Judaism, as it confronts new religious forms, while preserving the categories and attitudes of old. That such continuity

should exist is in part an expression of Jewish faithfulness and fidelity. It is, as already suggested above, also a consequence of the adoption of methods of worship, through image and form, that evoke a deep sense of otherness, coupled with a theology that is hard to reconcile with classical Jewish views of God. Finally, it cannot be divorced from the historical and sociological reality of Jews living as a minority, often a persecuted minority, in Christian and Muslim lands. Such historical conditions do not easily lend themselves to profound theological rethinking of one's attitude to the oppressive majority society. All these factors conspire to maintaining age old attitudes to other religions and to their application to Christianity.

Meiri is to be appreciated within this context. Over and against the various halachic authorities who resolved challenges in day to day living in relation to Christians and Christianity on an ad hoc basis, Meiri developed a systematic view of other religions and in fact constitutes one of the earliest attempts to formulate a broad Jewish theology of contemporary religions. One way of stating Meiri's achievement is to present him as having moved from framing the broader issues in terms of *Avoda Zara* to thinking of them in terms of the same God. Systematic application of this perspective yields a systemic revolution in relation to contemporary religions. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to present the various implications of Meiri's revolution to Judaism's attitudes to world religions. For present purposes two points are crucial. The first is that Meiri is the one and only halachist who resolves the question of *Avoda Zara* fully and exclusively by using a same-God strategy. Having recognized that the God of Judaism and of other contemporary religions are one opens the way for him to declare all talmudic issues pertaining to *Avoda Zara* as no longer valid for contemporary religions. Application of *Avoda Zara* would seem impossible,

once it is recognized that two religions worship the same God. *Avoda Zara* would thus be understood, following biblical foundations, as worship of another God, rather than as the entry into the domain of otherness, be it the otherness of other people, other religions or other practices and ways of worship. For Meiri, therefore, there is no question that the God of Christianity and the God of Judaism are one.

This leads to the second important point in our discussion - what is the method by means of which Meiri arrives at this recognition? Here we find another way of approaching the same-God question and indeed an important theoretical contribution to any same-God discussion. In order to appreciate it we need to look more closely at Meiri's reasoning. Meiri's views are summed up by two main claims. The first concerns the nature of idolatry of old, presumably biblical and rabbinic, and its relation to contemporary religions. According to Meiri, idolatry of old no longer exists, except in remote regions. Accordingly, all that appears in talmudic sources concerning pagans and idol worshipers is no longer relevant to contemporary religions. As Moshe Halbertal has suggested, Meiri relies on a theory of religious progress. *Avoda Zara* is really a matter of the past as humanity and its religions have progressed from earlier primitive (fetishist) understanding, to a higher understanding of God. Such a theory of progress draws from philosophical literature of the middle ages, but it seems to me it draws no less on the fundamental distinction between the religions of old and the religions that Meiri encounters. Here intuition may be at play again. To the theoretical discussion may be added the intuitive understanding that one's neighbors or conversation partners are not the base idolaters, described in the Talmud. Meiri shares a common universe of discourse with Christian scholars. We know of intellectual exchanges between himself and Christian clergy, and his entire spiritual

environment is one in which the intellectuals and thinkers of the different religions form bonds of common community and purpose. Such a climate of sharing provides a counterpoint to prevailing attitudes of Jewish minorities in other European centers and may be one of the factors that allows Meiri's attitudes to flourish. Within this context one can readily consider the view of progress in the history of religions, according to which the religions seen today - notably Christianity and Islam in Meiri's case - are fundamentally different from the religions spoken of in the Talmud. As a consequence, many of the talmudic rulings concerning *Avoda Zara* no longer apply.

The other key component in Meiri's view is the recognition that the nations of today are bound by moral codes and practice moral living. Meiri uses the moral argument to distinguish between the religions of old and contemporary religions. Today's nations are restricted by the ways of religion. They possess a moral code. The negative and immoral representations of non Jews found in earlier sources therefore do not apply to them.

A key challenge in understanding Meiri is to understand the relation between the two components of Meiri's thought. What is the relation between the claim that contemporary religions are not idolatrous and their description as moral and law abiding? On first view, Meiri shifts the ground of discussion from theology - the ground upon which most considerations of Christianity's status as *Avoda Zara* took place - to morality. Rather than focus upon the nature of the understanding of the Divine espoused by a given religion, Meiri claims the relevant consideration is the moral life enabled by the religion. Religions that have a moral code should not be considered along the lines the Talmud prescribes for idolatrous religions. However, upon closer examination Meiri's position should be understood not as an avoidance of the theological dimension, but as establishing a different

method by means of which the identity of the God worshipped by a religion may be known. Accordingly, the life of the believers, rather than the theological statements of the religion, is the ultimate proof of identity of its God. A religion that teaches and upholds a moral way of living is proof of the God who is worshipped through that religion. We may thus posit the following understanding of the relationship between Meiri's two statements regarding contemporary religions. The second statement, according to which the nations of today are bound by the boundaries of religion, holds the key to the first, that they are no longer idolatrous. It is not simply that they have ceased to worship idols, but rather that the means by which we are able to make this statement is through an examination of the moral quality of their lives. Morality points to the God who is known through the religion, and moral living suggests a notion of God that is real, in terms of His impact upon the lives of believers.

Meiri does not overlook the diversity of religious practice, ritual and specific beliefs about God, that distinguish different religions. Still, he is willing to consider them all as legitimate forms of religion. This assumes an ability to distinguish what is fundamental to a religion from what is secondary or instrumental. I would not say that for Meiri all of religion is simply a means of establishing a moral society. Rather, religion is about transforming the human person towards a higher spiritual vision, associated with God. Details of theology are secondary to the approach to God. The same holds true for variations of ritual practice.

Meiri's structure drives home an important lesson for the same-God discussion. There is no God of this and God of that religion. There is only God. Therefore, a religion, a lifestyle or a set of practices, either do bring one into relationship with God, or they don't.

The core question is thus even more fundamental than the same-God question - it is simply the "God question". Once it is recognized that a given religion provides access to God, all other details are secondary.

Meiri is revolutionary in how he formulates the question, in the method he adopts for answering it and in the conclusions - both theological and practical - that he reaches. Informing his entire approach is the recognition that God is known through the ethical lives of believers. In what follows, I would like to extend this criterion from the ethical lives of believers to the overall spiritual lives of believers, as a way of further advancing our discussion of the same-God question, or perhaps following Meiri, we ought to simply say - "the God question". Applying the moral test to the question of the identity of the God worshipped in a religion assumes God can be known through the fruits of contact with Him or with the teachings communicated in His name. This principle can be extended from basic morality to other aspects of the spiritual life. We may consider the effects of contact with God upon the human person as indications of the identity of God. These can include those expressions of moral and spiritual excellence that constitute religious perfection: humility, service, loving-kindness, compassion etc. Meiri's principle may be further extended to formative experiences of God, as these register within human awareness and as they shape the religious personality. Recognizing God through the traces of contact left in His human relationship partners may serve as an alternative to theological formulations that attempt to define or proclaim nature of God. If so, lives are testimonies to God and God's friends and those who live in His presence are the proof of His existence as well as identity.

This position has serious consequences for the very possibility of juxtaposing, contrasting and demarcating religions, in absolute ways. The serious implications of such a

position are that true and false knowledge of God are no longer the demarcating lines distinguishing between my religion and the religion of the other. Instead, true and false knowledge, true worship and idolatrous appeal to religion, are inherent in all religions. Validity and value are not givens of any religion, its doctrine or practices. They are no less a function of the degree to which any religion forms a true attachment to God.

If we can consider God not through teaching, story and philosophical formulation, but through the living traces of His presence, as these are made known in the lives of believers, this permits a fresh consideration of the question of the God of Judaism and the God of Christianity. Certainly, there has been much in the history of Christianity, especially as this concerns its relations with Judaism, that has not been worthy of association with God, and that could therefore be labeled as the imprint of other gods within the Christian religion. Yet, other sections of Christianity do witness the living presence of God. I think of the lives of the outstanding Christian saints, whose teaching, example and inspiration are amongst the finest fruits of the human spirit and constitute signs of how God touches the lives and hearts of humans. I think of the religious teachings, moral as well as spiritual, that indicate direct awareness of God and His ways. I think even of the power of repentance and transformation that have characterized major denominations of contemporary Christianity in their relationship with Judaism. These are all fruits of a living spirit, that offers testimony to God.

To think of recognition of the God of Christianity through the lives of Christian believers makes us confront simultaneously the worst, as well as the best, in Christianity. The finest examples of spiritual lives are contrasted with ugly moments, from the history of Jewish-Christian relations. We are, however, at a point in time at which Christians have

confronted their own past. This confrontation has been understood by Christians as an expression of the Holy Spirit in their lives, leading them to *teshuva* (metanoia). As we have come to learn at every point in our reflections on the God of Judaism and Christianity, there comes a point of choice. Here too we have the choice of recognizing this repentance, and opening ourselves to the recognition of God, as He has been known in the lives of believing Christians, notwithstanding the moments of darkness that have shaped so much of Judaism's encounter with Christianity.

Shifting the testing ground for religious authenticity and for the identity of God from theology to human behavior and experience have a corollary in the attitude that religions would adopt to one another. Testimony and listening would replace philosophical argument and inter-religious debate. Recognizing God's presence and reality in the life and religion of the other constitutes a testimony to God that transcends differences in names of God and in forms of religious life. Rather than assuming that a religion - any religion - does or does not appeal to the one God, the true God, the correct God - our God, we should seek traces of the one living God where these are found.

Conclusion: God in Judaism and Christianity - Awaiting the Future

In examining the Christian God from a Jewish perspective we posed two questions. One was whether the Jewish God and the Christian God are one and the same. The second was whether the Christian view of God could be considered as one more expression of a great variety of Jewish understandings of God. It seems to me that both questions require awaiting the future, rather than focusing exclusive attention on historical formulations of

Judaism and Christianity. Historical precedent presented us with a variety of positions. As noted, contemporary Judaism has not come to an unequivocal position in its view of the Christian God. Recognizing the identity of the Christian God therefore remains an act of choice, whether it is a choice between existing rabbinic options or the choice needed in order to construct a given theological position, as various such points of choice have emerged in the framework of this paper.

As concerns the question of the legitimacy of a Trinitarian understanding of God from a Jewish perspective, this too is not a matter that one may pose in a historical vacuum. There is, interestingly enough, some historical precedent for a Jewish recognition of the validity of certain ways of understanding the Christian Trinity. However, this is uncharacteristic of Jewish attitudes to Christianity. Most of the Jewish attitude to Christian doctrine is conditioned by the historical circumstances that highlight the difference between the religions, enforcing the sense that Christianity is the religion of the other. From such a perspective it makes little sense to ask why Christian understanding could not be considered one more form of legitimate Jewish belief. The reason is perhaps not inherent in the belief itself, as much as in the fact that the belief defined the identity of a religious other. History cannot be undone. We can only look to the next chapter of the story, where we may find the hope for a different and better future. Whether that future might allow for a deeper theological rapprochement between the traditions is a matter upon which one can only speculate.

In concluding this essay, I would like to return to the strategy that seems to me personally to hold the greatest value in and of itself and the greatest promise for leading us towards a better and more spiritual future, a future that holds great hope for Jewish-

Christian relations, as well as for interfaith relations in general. The path that I would personally give greatest weight to is the path that recognizes God not through doctrine, but through the signs of God's presence in the lives of the faithful. Such recognition calls for a different kind of listening and attention to the spiritual reality of Christianity than has been characteristic of Judaism for all of its history. I believe the future mandates a different kind of listening, as part of a quest, that must be undertaken by all religions, to find the traces of the living God in all religions.*

The suggestion that God's identity may be established through traces of His presence in the lives of believers seems to me particularly interesting. I, and many others, consider Judaism to be in crisis. At the heart of that crisis, as I have argued elsewhere, is the crisis of God. While God remains the conceptual center of Judaism, His presence is usually eclipsed by other values that govern Jewish life - the Jewish people, Torah study, the land and even faithfulness to God. This has been felt most keenly by the droves of Jewish youth who flock to India, many in search of a spiritual life they did not find in Judaism. The search for God, when extended to other religions, has not led to renewed Jewish interest in Christianity. The reasons for this lie in history, not in theology. Recognizing the divine presence in the lives of believers is a powerful strategy for recognizing the same God, and thereby opening up possibilities for spiritual and theological inspiration between Christians and Jews.

If Jewish-Christian relations could advance beyond the classical threat of loss of Jewish identity through conversion to another religion, I could well envision a world in which these two religions aid one another, rather than compete with one another. If God's presence can be found in the lives of believers of other religions, along with it can be found

also example and inspiration for the Jewish religion. Contact with the spiritual lives of other traditions may prove to be one way - clearly not the only way - for exposing Jewish life to a spiritual heritage that is properly its own, and that has been lost through its meanderings in exile. God's presence is the common quest of Christians and Jews. In looking towards the future, seeking God's presence, Judaism may not only cure its own deficiencies, but also find a healing for the painful history of its relationship with Christianity.