

Do we worship the same God?

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“Do we worship the same God?” In what way do I find this question compelling? In this brief paper, I offer what I will call a prayerful response by a Jewish philosopher. I understand this to be a response that integrates as many dimensions of reading and belief as the inquirer is aware of.ⁱ An alternative I do not pursue is to respond straightforwardly by offering my direct judgments about “the God of Israel” and about the God worshipped by Christians and the God worshipped by Muslims. I am skeptical about our abilities to identify the singularity of each tradition or to speak within a single discourse about all the traditions however singular or complex each may be. I am not skeptical, however, about the capacities of our traditions to transmit records of divine speech. I therefore find the question “do we worship the same God?” compelling if it is posed, as it were, to our traditions of transmission rather than to us as individual scholars. The question would then introduce an occasion, as if were, for our listening to a dialogue among these traditions and, only then, as a means of listening to a dialogue among these records of divine speech. I must write “as it were” (כביכול, *k’vyakhol*) since I am writing, after all, as an individual scholar – and in the first person no less. There is something counterfactual about the way I am writing this contribution to our conference. Invoking comparisons about the one to whom we worship may indeed call for something counterfactual.

A Prayerful Response: “I pray that we worship the same God.”

The conference question refers to the God whom we worship, rather than the God about whom we offer scholarly claims. This reference is therefore an opening to my entering the discussion without trespassing on my skepticism. I may begin by referring to prayer as the conduit for any measure we may have of the direction of our various prayers. In beginning this way, I understand “worship” as a tradition-specific ritual practice offered, prototypically, in a community of worship and therefore by way of verbalized language (scripturally based) as well as various forms of action. I understand “prayer” as the individual person’s practice of offering words to God, separately or in the context of communal worship, and to intimate dialogue or interaction with God. I shall therefore refer to prayer as the practice in relation to which the conference question may be posed: an activity in relation to which the individual scholar qua individual may cognize both the noetic direction of his or her communal worship and any possible measure of different directions of worship. (For the sake of discussion, I refer here to the “direction of worship” as a verbal meeting-place between the rabbinic notion of *kavvanah*, or “intention/direction” of worship, and the phenomenological notions of *noesis* and, specifically, of the noema or object of noesis.) Phenomenologically, the individual scholar’s prayer marks, as well, a region of noetic movement between individuated cognition and participation in worship. The form of this movement will introduce any measure that may be available for comparing one direction of worship and another. Another reason that I invoke prayer is that, if we fail to locate useable measures of this kind, I may at least speak of my *hope* for our sharing a direction of worship, and I think of prayer as an activity through which one offers oneself as willing agent of the One who alone fulfills hopes or does not.

A Theo-political Response: "I believe it is God's will that at this time in our histories we in the Abrahamic traditions declare that we worship the same God, albeit by way of mutually exclusive practices of worship."

This response further contextualizes the prayer I invoked in #1. I assume not only that the direction of worship is measured only within worship but also that any community and tradition's measure of worship may vary from epoch to epoch (and that how epochs are measured is itself a subject of worship). The conference question is therefore situated within a specific epoch of worship (or therefore of what some call "salvation history"). The prayer I offered belongs to this epoch; I do not presume that it applies to any other, short of the end-time.

An Eschatological Response: "In the end of days all humanity will worship the one God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. The end-time is present now, was present at creation, and is present all days in the presence of God, in His eternal activity, and in His Word. All who share in His presence do, to the degree of that sharing, live in the end of days. We know that His created and His revealed and redeeming Word directs and instructs us in the ways of living toward His presence; and He has declared His presence with us. But we cannot fully articulate, in our self-conscious means of knowing, how we have and do indeed live in that Presence. We are known by that Presence rather than being individual agents who know that Presence. Therefore, we have reason to expect that the God to whom we worship makes Himself present as well in the worship of others. But we cannot say clearly if, when, where, and how He does so—in their worship or, in any exact sense, in our own as well."

This response offers the only means I perceive, thus far, to refer the conference question beyond the context of some prayer within some worship within some epoch of worship. It is to refer it to the eschatological end of worship: the direction or noematic referent of such an epoch of worship. Perceived as noema, eschatology offers another object for scholarly study, but in that sense it is also limited to the context of study. One alternative is to refer prayerfully to the eschaton, as I do here. This is to refer to it "vaguely," however, or without the clarity that appears only in individuated cognitions. Another alternative is to observe ways in which the eschaton enters the present

moment: within worship, for example, or – in rabbinic terms – in *shabbat*. It remains to be seen, however, if this presence would introduce any manner of cognition and measurement we have not yet already considered.

A Rabbinic Response (by which I mean, at once, all of the following: a Jewish-doctrinal response; a response grounded in the literatures and religious authorities of the classical rabbinic sages, as read through the various traditions of commentary they spawned; a halakhic response; an axiologically Jewish response): “*There are grounds for a series of competing claims:*”

- a. *There is rabbinic warrant for either affirming or denying that Muslims worship the same God as Jews and that Christians worship the same God as Jews (overall there tends to be more support of Muslim worship than of Christian, except for participants in European Jewish-Christian dialogue);[ii,iii,iv]*
- b. *There is strong rabbinic warrant for identifying some forms of worship, whether by Jews or non-Jews, as idolatrous and, therefore, as offered to gods other than God;[v]*
- c. *There is also strong rabbinic warrant for recognizing that Jews ultimately understand only their own worship and that each religion remains at some point opaque to the other;[vi]*
- d. *There is strong rabbinic warrant for recognizing that the God to whom Jews pray makes Himself known in other ways to other peoples (and that means other languages or religious discourses);[vii]*
- e. *I believe that rabbinic doctrine defines the limits within which I can respond to this question. Within those limits, however, it refrains from offering me any one determinate response. In other words, rabbinic doctrine requires me to make fresh judgments on the basis of the issues and evidence before me at*

the time of this judgment. Within this paper, my judgment is therefore displayed only through the unity of all eight levels of my response (from prayer through philosophy back to prayer).

I am skeptical, in other words, that the conference question would be adequately served by efforts to identify the doctrinal basis, within each tradition, for recognizing and measuring other traditions' directions of worship. These efforts are indeed helpful introductory exercises: enabling participants to verbalize measures, within each worshipping community, for evaluating the directions of worship (my reticent phrase for the noemata of worship and prayer). But these exercises do not clarify for us the character or directions of others' worship. My skepticism reflects my assumption that the God to whom we worship is known only as He knows us, as participants in a worshipping community, so that reflecting on doctrines enables us to see more clearly how He know us but not necessarily how He knows others. My review of rabbinic doctrine enables me to measure the limits of my participation in the work of the conference. Just as it allows noetic movement between scholarship and communal worship, prayer also discloses the limits of this movement – just how far “it will stretch,”^{viii} on the one hand to meet cognition's demands for clarity and, on the other hand, to honor the locality of communal worship.

A Scriptural Response (a response grounded in readings of the Abrahamic scriptural narratives): “The narratives of ancient Israel, as displayed in Tanakh, in the New Testament, and in the Qur'an, are framed within and extend the terms of the religion of ancient Israel. There is therefore strong narrative warrant for speaking of the Abrahamic Religions as sharing a narrative frame for characterizing God's identity as, for example, creator of the universe, revealer of His word and will, commander of human behavior, teacher of ultimate wisdom, author of universal redemption in the time to come, a dear friend and ultimately a lover of those who love Him, the only source of our being, knowledge, and peace. There are also narrative grounds for distinguishing different spheres of God's self-identity as known in these different traditions. But there are at the same time strong narrative warrants for identifying different and at times seemingly

mutually exclusive sub-communities within these traditions, making competing claims about the divine identities even within these traditions.”

This scriptural response introduces a potential source of movement from rabbinic doctrine toward the setting I will recommend for addressing the conference question: inter-Abrahamic scriptural study (Response #7). This movement begins with the rabbinic practice of proof-texting Tanakh as a warrant (*asmachta*) for innovations in the sages’ halakhic and aggadic reasonings and with the rabbinic practice of re-reading the written Torah as stimulus to ever-new, context-specific *midrashim*, or performative interpretations. Analyzing rabbinic hermeneutics through the lens of contemporary Jewish philosophy and semiotics, I suggest that the plain sense of Tanakh appears within these rabbinic practices as a plenum of really possible meanings of the divine word: a source of indefinitely renewed readings, each one appropriate to its time and context. When understood in this way, the *peshat* is authoritative but irremediably vague, its meaning and performative force clarified only with respect to such context-specific readings.

A Jewish Philosophic Response: “For our day the most significant elements of a Jewish philosophic response are:”

- a. *Distinguishing levels of reading, beginning with the distinction between plain sense (peshat) and interpreted sense (derash); I believe this elementary rabbinic distinction makes a significant contribution to our discussion. For the Talmudic authors, peshat does not mean what some later medieval commentators took to mean “the literal sense.” Peshat means the sense or place of a verse or verses in their somewhat broader literary context, such as the meaning of “earth” within the specific plot of Genesis 1. As opposed to literal sense however, peshat does not include*

the ostensive reference of such a term: in this case what we may imagine “earth” means as some physical part of the universe wholly independent of the biblical narrative. *Peshat* also lacks any performative or what some call “readerly-collusive” meaning: what the verse or verses tell us to do or believe. In the terms of my own favorite semiotic, or theory of signs, I would say, perhaps more starkly, that the *peshat* refers only to a verse’s internal sense in the flow of a narrative; by itself it has no determinate meaning for us. I believe that, for the rabbinic sages, such determinate meaning is to be found only in some level of interpretive meaning: through the interpreting community and individual’s lived relationship to the verse and to the broader scriptural literature. In the most general sense *derash* refers to any level of interpretive meaning of this kind. I think this is a powerful distinction because it means that God speaks to us by way of the *langue* (in this sense, “the alphabet”) of *peshat*, but only as enacted in the *parole* (in this sense, “speech-acts”) of those who in a given time and place hear the scriptural word as commanding this or that action and revealing this or that truth. In these terms what do we mean when we name or characterize the one to whom we worship? Our utterance has to make sense in itself—it has to have a plain sense—but what is its determinate, interpreted meaning? If we maintain this distinction between sense and meaning then our discussions about “the same God” will have to be nuanced. We will have disclaimed our capacities to appeal directly through our utterances to some publicly visible clear and distinct entity about which we can say, “Oh yes, it is this not that.” It means that outside of the intimacy of any moment of vision or relation our accounts

will always bear the modesty we associate with “mediated” or “interpretive” or “context-specific” accounts. [ix]

- b. *Refining our semiotic or logical tools for discriminating and clarifying the many constituents of interpretive meaning:* I am concerned that, just as modern thought weakened our trust in the disciplines of traditional exegesis, so too the post-modern turn has weakened our trust in the efficacy of disciplined reasoning. I maintain my trust, however, that the discourses of scripture and of rabbinic interpretation are highly disciplined and that if inspected adequately (or “rubbed” as one rabbinic sage put it[x]), they may display to us the very patterns of self-corrective reasoning—*logoi* or *s’vora*—that we may seek but despair of finding. Not just any way of reasoning about “the same God” will uncover the answers we seek. Having been disciplined by scriptural reading and rabbinic interpretation reasoning, I, must, for example, identify this locution—“the same God”—as invoking a finite set of scriptural terms, each of which bears a set of “plain senses.” Each plain sense, furthermore, yields its own sizable set of interpreted meanings, each of which invokes its time and place and context in a reading community’s salvation history. So, for example, the Jewish worshipper may direct his or her intentionality (*kavvanah*) to Elohim Creator of heaven and earth (*bore olam*), or to “You, Adonai” (*atah hashem*), or “God of Abraham” (*elohei avraham*), or “God of Sarah” (*elohei sarah*), or “the Holy One” (*hakadosh baruch hu*) or to any of the many epithets for the One whom one embraces in the darkness of prayer. And out of what context of communal participation, of personal life, and of the history of Israel does one invoke these epithets? And what

of the performative force of the invocation? One may understand “interpreted meaning” to include the meaning’s performative force as well. Even within the biblical plain sense, for example, consider the difference between the way Amos invokes the God of Israel who condemns the injustices of Israel’s kings and the way Hosea invokes the God of Israel who finds Israel in her blood and soothes her after her suffering. Do these prophets invoke “the same God?” When one refers to “God,” does that mean one is referring ostensibly to some single object “out there,” or, is one invoking an infinite set about which one cannot measure sameness or difference? Or is one invoking that One who, however infinite and inscrutable, gives Himself here and now to the singularity of the relationship that binds this one seeker to this One who also seeks? All these questions come, moreover, even before we entertain the possibility or the prospect of measuring the sameness or difference that link or do not link the one whom this Jew worships to the one whom this Christian worships and this Muslim worships. I do not believe these questions are unanswerable—whether wrapped in infinite mystery or disbarred by some logical rule—but I do believe the answers will be nuanced and many leveled.

- c. *But how would we choose a language in which we could pursue such nuanced and many leveled answers? Is the language generated out of some a priori rules of construction (like an artificial language of science or logic)? Or is it drawn strictly out of revealed sources (scriptures)? Or do we hear it somehow afresh in response to an unexpected question (as unanticipated as revealed scripture, but also constructed out of what we already know). From*

out of the resources of contemporary Jewish philosophy, the answer I hear to these questions is inexact. I am drawn to classical biblical and rabbinic discourse, in which the primary verb for “knowing God” is *yidiah*: the same term for “knowing” as in “Adam knew Eve” or as in “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:5). This verb does not refer to knowledge at a distance or to knowledge by identity (that we know God only by participating in God). *Yidiah* is knowledge through intimate relationship, and like interpersonal relations it is a relationship that begins in time and develops, moves, changes, grows deeper.

To say that “I worship God” is therefore at the very least to say that I count myself as having some manner of intimate relation with God. Can I talk about the intimate relations I have with friends? Yes, but I would not presume to “capture” those relationships through simple predicative characterizations or simple ostensive references or pointings: as if to say that I could fully describe my wife in a word or even in a very long string of sentences. I would not rely merely on utterances as a means of sharing with someone else any significant aspects of my intimate relation with God. Nor would I be silent or give up on communication. Instead, I would first acknowledge that my relation to God is articulated through patterns of action, cognition, feeling, expectation, and interrelation (the list continues indefinitely) and that I discern in these patterns a more precise register of my knowledge of God than I can articulate—at least outside of my worshiping community – in the sentences of any natural language. To share what I know with someone else, I must therefore enter into a relationship with this person that will, like any other relationship, begin in time, develop slowly, move, change, grow deeper. Within the complex life of that relationship, my interlocutor and I could share familiarity with certain patterns of life and thought, and I could then speak

of aspects of my knowledge of God by pointing to, commenting on, or drawing analogies with these patterns. Over time, we two may develop a linguistic shorthand for the ways we tend to refer to these patterns. Within the limits of our constructed vocabularies and shorthand, we may, only then, begin to share some of our knowledge of divine things.

I think this is one of the profound dimensions of Jewish belief and ontology. It is signaled in the famous dicta of Jewish sages, classic and modern: The words of the rabbinic sage Hillel, “If I am not for myself who will be for me, But if I am for myself alone, what am I?” The words of Martin Buber, “In the beginning was relation.” And Emmanuel Levinas’s references to “proximity” and to the “face of the other.” As for our present conversation about “the same God,” I believe this Jewish wisdom leads to the following recommendation: if a Christian or a Jew wants to discuss whether or not “a Muslim, Christian, or a Jew” does or does not worship the same God, the “Muslim, Christian, or Jewish” interlocutors will first have to enter into significant relations, one with the other with the other. Only by way of a three-part relationship of this kind can meaningful and verifiable claims be offered about the relationship between the God to whom I worship and to whom you worship and to whom you worship. By the standard of Jewish wisdom I have just called upon, this relationship will have to begin somewhere in time and it will take some time to develop, evolve, change and move until a response to our question can begin.

A Scriptural Reasoning Response

There are many ways that Muslims, Jews, and Christians may interact with one another so that, over time, they could share conditions for articulating significant characteristics of the One to whom they each pray. Scriptural Reasoning represents one

practice of this kind. Nurtured since 1995 by a society of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars, it is a practice of shared scriptural study. The rules of practice are simple: join a small fellowship of study (8-20 persons, but subdivided into study groups of no more than 6-8 persons); meet regularly (perhaps every two weeks or monthly for 2 hour sessions; or every 2-3 months for 4 hr. sessions; or twice annually for sessions of 2 days or more); focus group study on small excerpts from the three Abrahamic scriptures, spending hours on short selections so that there is time for the texts to become windows to each other and to the heart-knowledge-minds of all participants; study as if all participants shared in each scriptural tradition, in the sense of being invited equally to read, question, and explore possible meanings of each word and verse; privilege no individual person or tradition's voice or authority. (Ideally, the traditions' "plain sense" readings of the texts are introduced in their primary languages by those capable of doing so. But, after initial introduction, the English translations are read as if they were traditional, so that all have equal access to the discussion --albeit with openings to alternate translations to "rub" the primary languages' polyvalence.) The "reasoning" of scriptural reasoning is what may happen over time as trajectories of discussion and interpretation emerge that do not appear to belong specifically to any one text tradition or (to be sure!) to any one discipline of the academy.

Scriptural reasoning would, I believe, offer an optimal context for conversing about each tradition's relation to "the same God (or not)." This study would not prepare participants to learn and recognize their several traditions' doctrines about the identities of the one whom other traditions worship. Participants would pursue such study outside the SR circle, each within his or her "own" tradition. (SR folks tend to call such primary study "textual reasoning" – that is, studying according to the interpretive texts that limn each tradition of commentary.) To enter SR study is to come in some

sense already settled in the range of one's traditional doctrines: coming now to meet the other more directly and intimately. Over time (it is not a quick practice!), SR study should – in grace – nurture the depth of inter-personal and thus inter-traditional relations appropriate to hearing and seeing meaningful aspects of the relations that trace each participant's "knowledge" of the one to whom he or she prays. *Elemental features of this study are: raising the question of others' worship only in the company of those others; and in the context of philosophically disciplined, doctrinally resourced, prayerfully engaged, theo-politically alert, shared study of our different but in spaces overlapping narrative sources and traditions.*

From my perspective as a Jewish philosopher, Scriptural Reasoning introduces the most – or perhaps only – compelling setting for responding to the conference question, since it honors each of the previous responses.

A Prayerful Unity of Responses

If, at this time in theo-history, I pray that we worship the same God, I also pray that I take up such a question only in the fullness of my life with God, among the people Israel. Within the terms of this essay, "the fullness of my life..." is represented by my capacity, in grace, to attend to and engage equally all eight (or more) dimensions of reading and belief. The integrity of my participation in such a discussion would depend on the integration of all these dimensions as well as on my integration into an appropriate circle of inter-traditional, theological study. To achieve this integrity, I have "work" to do – as suggested in this essay – but in the end I can only pray that the work is met by the work of others and by divine favor.

In closing, I summarize the assumptions that underlie the network of eight responses I have offered to the conference question. These responses draw me to the conclusion that the conference question is compelling only when taken up by something like an inter-Abrahamic fellowship of scriptural reasoning:

- Other peoples and other individuals may worship in an idolatrous fashion and, thus, worship someone I do not know or seek to worship the one I know but in a fashion that profoundly obscures His identity.
- I would not, however, make judgments about others' worship until I had extended contact with them. I cannot make a priori judgments about what God is doing with and in relation to other peoples, as well as with and in relation to other individuals of the people Israel. Other peoples may profess knowledge of "God," but display something else. Or, they may profess knowledge of some god I do not recognize; but their manner of worship and life may suggest to me an unexpected relation to the God I know. Other Jews, for that matter, may profess doctrinally rabbinic belief in God, but until I enter into relationship with them and see how they eat, sleep and pray, I would not be able to comment on the object and nature of their worship.
- Traditional rabbinic doctrine sets the parameters for a Jewish philosopher's response to the conference question. But I discover that, on this question, there are rabbinic sources for both affirming and denying that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, creator of heaven and earth. As a consequence, I read rabbinic doctrine, performatively, as sending me out to look and see and hear about the practices of this or that

Christian and this or that Muslim before I would be able offer a reasonable judgment about whose worship may or may not be to the one God.

- There are modern and contemporary rabbinic arguments for or against engaging in the intense relationships with other religionists that, I believe, is a prerequisite to asking this question.[xi xii] Once again, I read the equivocal voice of Jewish wisdom on this question as a sign that the answer depends on when and where and why I entertain it. I judge this to be a theo-political question that, in this day and age, has become an urgent one.

Notes

ⁱ My thanks to University of Virginia PhD Candidates Peter Kang and Omer Shaukat for contributing to the composition of this essay. Mr. Kang's work extends the Christian postliberalism of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck as well as their critique of supersessionism. Mr. Shaukat's work examines questions of ontology in medieval Muslim and modern Western philosophy.

ⁱⁱ Before citing some evidence, let me recommend several secondary readings that are easily available and provide fine introductions to the literature on Jewish attitudes toward Christian and Muslim beliefs.

- Alan Brill, "Judaism and Other Religions: An Orthodox perspective" at http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/Brill.htm#_ednref8T. This is an ideal essay for this discussion, citing a full range of classical and medieval rabbinic sources on the other religions. Since the essay is available online, I will draw most of my evidences directly from it so that others can check for themselves. (Dr. Brill also has a forthcoming book on the topic.)
- David Novak is always a great help on such things, for example his books, *Jewish-Christian dialogue: a Jewish justification*, (New York ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1989); and *The image of the non-Jew in Judaism: an historical and constructive study of the Noahide Laws* (New York : E. Mellen Press, 1983).
- A classic source on Jewish-Christian relations in the late medieval and modern periods is Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Behrman House, 1961).
- Also helpful (among many other sources) is Louis Jacobs, "Judaism and Other Religions," in *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973): 284-292. Among other recent works, see Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Christianity and Judaism: The Formative Categories*. With Bruce D. Chilton. I. *Revelation, The Torah and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1995) and continuations.

- On early Jewish attitudes toward Christianity, and Christian attitudes toward Judaism, see, inter alia, William Horbury, *Jews and Christians in contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1998); Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987; E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).

ⁱⁱⁱ By way of illustrating classical and medieval rabbinic sources that are kinder toward Christian and Muslim belief:

Generic attitudes to non-Jews:

“For the Rabbis – or at least some of them – Divine prophecy was self-evidently too powerful to be bound by human categories of Jew or non-Jew. While this is not a multi-covenant theology, this strand of Rabbinic thought paves the way for such a possibility: ‘The prophet Elijah said: I call heaven and earth to bear witness that anyone -- Jew or gentile, man or woman, slave or handmaid -- if his deeds are worthy, the Divine Spirit will rest upon him’ (*Tanna Debai Eliyahu* 9:1). ‘When the Holy one Blessed be He, revealed himself to give the Torah to Israel, he revealed himself not only to Israel but to all the other nations (*Sifrei Devarim* 343)’” (Alan Brill, “Judaism and Other Religions: An Orthodox perspective” (np).

For the early modern, Italian Bible commentator, Obaadiah Seforno, “all humanity is beloved by God and chosen from amongst all creation. As Zephaniah has prophesied, the nations will in messianic times all call upon God. The distinction between Israel and the nations is the presence – or absence – of the Sinai revelation. All have the image of God, but the Sinai experience is only for Jews – there are two aspects to our lives. The universal and the particular; The image of God and our commitment to Bible as understood by Rabbinic literature, Torah study, ritual law, and peoplehood’ (*Light of the Nations*, cited in Brill).

Attitudes to the other Abrahamic religions:

The most cited source of favorable attitudes is R. Menahem Ha-Me'iri (14th century). “Ha-Me'iri's personal view can best be summarized thus: he held that the exclusion of Christians and Moslems from the category of the idolatrous -- an exclusion which had been suggested purely casuistically by earlier halakhists -- was to be acknowledged as a firm and comprehensive principle. At first sight, the opinion of other halakhists and that of Ha-Me'iri might be taken as identical. Modern scholars, affected by an apologetic bias of their own, have read into the Ashkenazi halakhists' views the theory held by HaMe'iri,” Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961): 115.

To take an earlier example, for Yehudah Halevi (11 century, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*) “all religions that came after the Torah of Moses are part of the process of bringing humanity closer to the essence of Judaism, even though they appear its opposite. The nations serve to introduce and pave the way for the long-awaited messiah. He is the fruit and they, in turn, will all become his fruit when they acknowledge him” (Brill).

Among modern orthodox commentators of the 18th century, Yaakov Emden “stretches the traditional inclusivist position into universal directions: ‘We should consider Christians and Moslems as instruments for the fulfillment of the prophecy that the knowledge of God will one day spread throughout the earth. Whereas the nations before them worshipped idols, denied God's existence, and thus did not recognize God's power or retribution, the rise of Christianity and Islam served to spread among the nations, to the furthest ends of the earth, the knowledge that there is One God who rules the world, who rewards and punishes and reveals Himself to man. Indeed, Christian scholars have not only won acceptance among the nations for the revelation of the Written Torah but have also defended God's Oral Law. For when, in their hostility to the Torah, ruthless persons in their own midst sought to abrogate and uproot the Talmud, others from among them arose to defend it and to repulse the attempts’ (*Commentary to Pirke Avot*, 4:13)” (cited in Brill).

Attitudes toward Islam:

Medieval Jewish philosophers and mystics who drew on Sufi sources practiced de facto tolerance toward Islam. Examples include Bahya ibn Paquda (*Hovot Halevavot*), Moses Maimonides (*Moreh Nevikhim*), Obadyah Maimonides (Treatise of the pool, al-Maqala al-

hawdiyya), Abraham Ibn Hasdai (translator of al- Ghazali), above all Ibn Gabirol (for example, *Ani ha'Ish*). Comparable Muslim influences are evident in *Treatise of the Garden* by Moses Ibn Ezra; in Shem Tov ibn Falaquera's *The Book of the Seeker (Sefer ha-Mevaqqesh)*, *Beginning of Science (Reshit hokhmah)*, *Book of Degrees Guide to the Guide (Moreh ha-Moreh)*; in Abraham Ibn Ezra (*Iggeret Hay ben Meqits*); in Abraham Ibn Daud (*Exalted Faith, al-'Aqida al-rafi'a*); in Obadyah b. Abraham b. Moses Maimonides (*The Treatise of the Pool, al-Maqala al-Hwadiyya*). [See, inter alia, Fenton, P. (1986) "The Arabic and Hebrew Versions of the Theology of Aristotle," in *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages. The Theology and Other Texts*, ed. Jill Kraye, William F. Ryan and Charles B. Schmitt (London: The Warburg Institute): 241-264. And Ibn Kammuna, *Examination of the Three Faiths*, trans. Moshe Perlmann (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971):148-49.

^{iv} Here are several classical and medieval rabbinic sources that are not kind toward Christian and Muslim belief.

The Talmudic sage R. Johanan says of one who teaches Torah to a non-Jew: "Such a person deserves death" [an idiom used to express indignation]. It is like placing an obstacle before the blind' (Sanh. 59a; Hag. 13a). And yet if a Gentile study the Law for the purpose of observing the moral laws of Noah, R. Meïr says he is as good as a high priest, and quotes: "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments, which if a man do, he shall live in them" (Lev. xviii. 5). The text does not specify an Israelite or a Levite or a priest, but simply "a man"—even a Gentile ('Ab. Zarah 26a)'" (Alan Brill, "Judaism and Other Religions: An Orthodox perspective," np.)

The highly influential medieval commentator Rashi was harsh on those other traditions that sought to uproot Judaism. "His particularism is shown in statements such as: 'I ask from You that Your Shekhinah should not rest anymore on the nations of the world and we will be separate from all other nations' (*Commentary to Exodus 33:16*)" (Brill, 3). Louis Jacobs adds that, as a rule, Jewish medieval thinkers considered both Islam and Christianity false religions, while at times exonerating them for the sake of social and economic interaction" (Jacobs, 286-7).

Katz cites Rashi's view that Israel's election came after all the other nations rejected God's Torah; Israel thereby gained exclusive access to God's truth (Rashi on Exod 19:5; Lev 19:33, Nu 22; 5-8).

Katz adds that medieval Jewish thinker tended to identify Christianity with the Talmud's "Rome," that is, an idolatrous nation bent on Israel's destruction (Katz, 16-17). In their debates with Christian polemicists, the commentators Rashbam and Josef Bekhor Shor argued strongly against the divinity of Jesus and the validity of a religion based on belief in the incarnation. For R Moses of Coucy (in *Sefer Mitsvoth Hagadol*), the Holy One shared His intimate Word only with Israel. Among halakhic sources critical of the other Abrahamic religions, Katz cites *Sefer Hasidim* as characteristic in its efforts to exclude contact with, for example, Christian ceremonies or implements. Katz notes how Rabbi Judah He-Hasid, like Rabbi Moses of Coucy, went "beyond the Talmud in regulating relations with Gentiles, especially in the field of ethics." (Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961: 102)

Brill notes that "The Maharal, Yehudah ben Betzalel Loewe (c. 1525-1609) was an eclectic Renaissance Jewish thinker who served as rabbi in Posen and Prague. His system, like many others in the early modern era, Jewish and non-Jewish, worked by creating binary pairs: in this case the redeemed world's sustaining Jews and their opponents the gentiles. Maharal built his theology more on Midrash with its apocalyptic and typological themes than on Biblical or philosophic universalism. The ancient struggles of Israel with the seven wicked nations and Amalek are ever with us: 'Israel and Edom are inverse and opposite—when one is in ascent then the other is in descent (BT *Sanhedrin* 21b). At the beginning, Israel is connected to the nations like a shell around a fruit. At the end, the fruit is separated from the shell completely and Israel is separated from them (*Gevurat Hashem* 23)'" (cited in Brill).

While the medieval kabbalists drew heavily on Muslim sources, Brill notes that early modern and later kabbalistic writers, including the early Hasidic masters, gave little credence to non-Jewish belief. "For[Isaac] Luria, the historical situation of exile is a manifestation of

the cosmic reality of rupture and evil. The gentiles are not merely the Other, or the anti-Israel, as in the less metaphysical approaches of Rashi; they are the same stuff as the evil at the beginning of creation. The internal logic of this myth leads to the radical notion – unsupported by classical Jewish texts – that non-Jews have no souls” (Brill 4). “R. Schneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of the Chabad Hasidic dynasty, clearly states at the beginning of his work *Likkute Amarim (Tanya)* that, as presented in Lurianic writings, gentiles do not have souls (16)” (Brill).

^v The Talmudic literature is replete with references to the idolatries of the other nations, the Romans in particular (BT *Avodah Zarah* 46a, *Megillah* 25b). Living among “idolaters” with whom, however, they often entered into successful socio-political and economic interaction, medieval rabbinic authorities gradually developed categories for distinguishing these Christian and Muslim neighbors from the idolaters known by the Biblical sources and the rabbinic sages. Katz notes that, for example, in the tenth century, Rabbenu Gershom drew a lesson from Rabbi Yohanan’s statement that [while Gentiles inside the land of Israel are idolaters,] ‘The Gentiles outside the land (of Israel) are not idolaters; they are but continuing the customs of their ancestors’ (BT *Hullin* 13b). For Gershom, the lesson is that, while Gentile Christians outside the land are idolaters in a technical sense, they may be treated as though they were not; Jews in his day may therefore engage in economic relations with neighboring Christians (Cited in Katz, 36-37).

^{vi} See, for example, the position of Rashi cited above, Note 3.

^{vii} See, for example, the positions of Halevi and S’forno cited above, Note 2.

^{viii} To invoke Hans Frei, “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?” in *The Bible and Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford, 1986): 36-77.

^{ix} Lest readers fear my response in 5a is meant to be relativistic or nominalist, I will add this somewhat more technical addendum for those interested. In somewhat more technical terms, I mean to suggest that there are different modes of signification and not every mode is adequate to representing any aspect of the Divine life or our relationship to it. For example, if I speak about “the toaster oven over there,” I assume my listener and I share and make appropriate use of two semiotic conventions. The first is to assume that, within the degree of precision needed for our communication, I can predicate certain descriptive terms of something “out there” and I can assume that my listener has a pretty good idea of what I mean by those terms and has an adequate ability to look out there and confirm whether or not he or she would also predicate those terms in the same way. We could call this the convention of shared predications (or agreement about the iconic use of signs). A second convention that we share—call it the conventional rules for ostensive reference—is that I can offer a judgment about something “out there,” meaning independent of both my listener and me. The convention implies that when I offer such an utterance I can be reasonably assured that my listener will know where “out there” he or she should look to perceive something that will clarify or test what I’ve just uttered (we could also call this conventional use of indexical signs). In these terms, my response 5a is meant to indicate that neither the iconic nor the indexical conventions nor any combination of them is adequate to deliver information about my relationship (including worship of) God or any aspect of the Divine life. There are other conventions, however, through which I can indeed make such references. These conventions tend to bear such names as “performative reference,” “triadic” or “multi-dimensional interpretation,” or various kinds of reference that are offered only within the context of explicit forms of interactive relations. To give one illustration of the latter, I mean that I cannot adequately point to or characterize the one to whom I worship except insofar as my listener shares some previously understood community of religious practice and speech with me; even then many such references may need to bear what some call “indexical markers”: that is to say, even for religious compatriots, my references have to signal in various ways the lived context of experience, relation, and speech with respect to which the references I’ve offered have meaning. I mean to indicate furthermore that these semiotic and epistemological challenges operate within a given Abrahamic tradition as well as across those traditions. I have added that this does not lead me to some utterly apophatic conclusion, but to additional levels of response.

^x *BT Tractate Shabbat* 38b.

^{xi} Of those who argue “for,” Alan Brill cites, for example, the practice of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, first Ashkenazi chief rabbi in the modern land of Israel: “As for other religions, in my opinion, it is not the goal of Israel's light to uproot or destroy them, just as we do not aim for the general destruction of the world and all its nations, but rather their correction and elevation, the removal of dross. Then, of themselves, they shall join the Source of Israel, from whence a dew of light will flow over them. ‘And I will take away the blood from his mouth and his detestable things from between his teeth, and he, too, shall remain for our God.’ (Zechariah 9:7) This applies even to idolatry -- all the more so to those religions that are partially based upon the light of Israel's Torah” (*Iggrot ha-Rayah* 112). “It is necessary to study all the wisdoms in the world, all ways of life, all different cultures, along with the ethical systems and religions of all nations and languages, so that, with greatness of soul, one will know how to purify them all” (*Arpelei Tohar* 33). Brill also cites “The current Chief Rabbi of England, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [who] became embroiled in controversy for stating a similar sentiment in the first edition of his work, *The Dignity of Difference*, writing, ‘In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.’ He was forced to clarify the statement as, ‘As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures, and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of Noahide law’ (55).”

^{xii} As for those who argue “against,” Brill cites the son of Rav Kook, Zevi Yehudah Kook, whose “ideology makes him the father of the settler movement and therefore influential in late twentieth-century Israeli political life. The fruit of Zevi Yehudah Kook’s exclusivist ideology can be seen in the conflict his students have caused and embraced with the Palestinians. The ideology itself is noteworthy for a staunch anti-Christianity that culls two millennia of sources without acknowledging any of the countervailing traditions. For Zevi Yehudah Kook, the attack on Christianity is motivated by the conflict with the wider Western culture which both threatens the Jewish purity of Israel from within and opposes his messianic settlement drive from without. Until now, none of his writings on Christianity have been translated into English; because I do not want to be his first translator, I am presenting his views in summary only.

Zevi Yehudah Kook resurrects many of the classic anti-Christian polemics with a vigor not seen for centuries. Among them: Christianity should be dismissed as an internal Jewish heresy; God the creator clearly cannot be a man; the Jewish God is alive whereas the Christian’s is dead. Christianity is the refuse of Israel, in line with the ancient Talmudic portrayals of Jesus as boiling in excrement” (Zevi Yehudah Kook, *Judaism and Christianity* [Hebrew] (Beit El: 2001). On a much gentler and more respectful level, I would add the teachings of Rav Soloveitchik who strongly opposed inter-religious dialogue. I cite the words of his namesake, Meir Soloveichik, in an essay opposing the statement I co-authored, *Dabru Emet*:

In September 2000, a Baltimore-based institute for interfaith dialogue issued a statement titled “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*.” The statement enumerated a series of theological beliefs shared by Jews and Christians, and insisted that such a statement was essential given the dramatic change during the last four decades in Christian attitudes toward Judaism. Signed by over 170 rabbis and Jewish studies professors, “*Dabru Emet*” — Hebrew for “speak the truth” — received much publicity in the media and was published as an ad in *The New York Times*. One feature of the statement, however, went largely unnoticed: While “*Dabru Emet*” had numerous rabbinical signatories, it had a paucity of Orthodox ones.

The reluctance of Orthodox rabbis, even those rabbis who have a history of communication with the Christian community, to sign the declaration reflects a

strict adherence to the admonitions of the revered Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, known by his students and followers as “the Rav,” who in the 1960s prohibited theological dialogue with the Catholic Church. With the 10th anniversary of the Rav’s passing being widely commemorated this Passover, reflection is warranted on the limits that the Rav’s prohibition still places on Orthodox Jews today — as well as on opportunities for dialogue yet to come.

The Rav’s opposition to communal, and organizational interfaith dialogue was partly predicated upon the prediction that in our search for common ground — a shared theological language — Jews and Christians might each sacrifice our insistence on the absolute and exclusive truth of our respective faiths, blurring the deep divide between our respective dogmas. In an essay titled “Confrontation,” Rabbi Soloveitchik argued that a community’s faith is an intimate, and often incommunicable affair. Furthermore, a faith by definition insists “that its system of dogmas, doctrines and values is best fitted for the attainment of the ultimate good.” In his essay, the Rav warned that sacrificing the exclusive nature of religious truth in the name of dialogue would help neither Jews nor Christians. Any “equalization of dogmatic certitudes, and waiving of eschatological claims, spell the end of the vibrant and great faith experiences of any religious community,” he wrote. (Meir Soloveichik, “How Soloveitchik Saw Interreligious Dialogue,” *The Jewish Daily Forward* April 15, 2003; available online, <http://www.forward.com/articles/8692/>, cited September 1, 2009). [The reference is to Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought*, 1964 Volume 6, #2.]