

JEWISH UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

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[That Judaism is specifically the religion of one people, Israel, shapes its entire discourse about the religious other. Halakhah (Jewish law) defines permitted interactions between Jews and non-Jews, thus setting the parameters for the traditional Jewish theology of the "other." Applying biblical concerns, Jews are absolutely prohibited from any activity that might generate idolatrous behavior by any human. Rabbinic halakhah expands this discussion to permitted positive interactions with those who obey God's laws for all human civilization, the seven Noahide laws which include a prohibition of idolatry. For non-Jews, fulfillment of these laws is the prerequisite for salvation. The author offers a preliminary analysis of these traditional categories of discourse about identity and their theological implications. She also suggests ways that this may be modified in light of new directions in Jewish-Christian relations.]

HUMAN SELF-IDENTITY BEGINS with the negative definition of "self" as "not other," spanning from the infantile recognition that parents have independent existences and extending to communal definitions of characteristics or boundaries that place some people "in" and others "out." We all live in overlapping circles of such communal boundaries, defined by such things as family, geographic proximity, co-workers, ethnicity, and religion. While some of these social structures are informal, others are defined by codified rules determining who is "self" and who is "other." Religious communities and national communities tend to be the most formal in defining these boundaries. Judaism, as primarily a national/ethnic community, traditionally handles these distinctions through the mechanisms of halakhah, of rabbinic legislation. This halakhic definition of "self" creates the underpinnings for the more theological expressions of this concept.¹

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In my article I offer a preliminary survey of the traditional Jewish halakhic definitions of self and other and their theological implications. I also explore some of the attempts to modify these understandings to answer the challenges presented to the traditional conceptions by the modern world. In the course of these discussions, I compare Judaism's understandings with the Catholic position presented in the documents on which this journal symposium focuses. However, there is urgent need for more intensive and serious scholarly research on this question before a more comprehensive answer can be presented. Although a few books and many articles have appeared in recent years, no one yet has seriously investigated the full range of medieval halakhic rulings about permitted and restricted interactions with the Christian and Muslim worlds, particularly with an eye to understanding their underlying theological positions.² Such work is a necessary preliminary for the task that many engaged in Jewish-Christian

¹ This distinction between halakhah and more theological modes overlaps but does not totally correspond to a dichotomy between the work of canon law and official church bodies speaking through apostolic authority on the one hand and the work of theologians on the other. Official statements of the Church often directly address theological issues, blending these modes of thought, but rabbinic halakhic pronouncements rarely do. However, these same rabbis, speaking or writing in different modes (that carry less authority) may well concern themselves with theology. This halakhic/theological definition also stands in significant tension with the contemporary sociological use of the term "identity." Sociologists begin with the self-perception and self-definition of the individual based on his or her own experiences, memories, and social networks, whatever they may be. The halakhic/theological identity expresses an ideal that often counters the trends that sociologists document. For a succinct summary of the sociological literature, see Laurence J. Silberstein, "Mapping, Not Tracing: Opening Reflection," in *Mapping Jewish Identities*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein (New York: New York University, 2000) 1–18. The social sciences approach is unproductive for a theologically based, norm oriented discussion grounded in how Jews have understood self and other through their history.

² David Novak whom I will cite extensively in what follows, has published the most, focusing on the Noahide laws and other permissive rulings. Others, such as David Rosen, "Judaism and Christianity—Yesterday and Today" [Hebrew], to be published in *De'ot*, have combed the sources for traditions that can serve as a basis for a positive Jewish theology about Christianity today. However, historical honesty and a true understanding of these sources requires that they be read in the fuller context of rabbinic struggles to understand the application of talmudic restrictions on idolatry to their own situations. (I thank Dov Linzer for sharing with me the handout for his lecture, "Entering into Churches and Mosques." His work here represents a start in this direction). The animosity that characterized so much of Jewish-Christian interactions until our times needs also to be taken into account. Historical Jewish interaction with Asian religions was minimal.

relations now recognize as urgent: the building of a Jewish theology of the religious other that will respond to the theological revolution in the Christian understanding of Judaism led by the Catholic Church.³

WHO IS A JEW?

At its most fundamental level, the definition of “Jew” is neither religious nor theological, but ethnic.⁴ This point is critical for understanding traditional Jewish understandings of self and other. Joseph Dan argues convincingly that the very concepts of religion and theology as the academy understands them today are Christian concepts, derived from Christianity’s early accommodations with Greco-Roman culture, resulting in a clear differentiation between the realms of church and state and between theology and philosophy. Judaism (and Islam), in contrast, have no such conceptual differentiation between the profane and the religious realms. Instead, these are cultures in which everything ideally participates in the holy, including the most mundane activities. Consequently, nothing lies outside the realm of religion; divinely ordained law governs literally every aspect of life, from the privacy of the home, to the marketplace, to the government, to matters of worship. Thus, the Jewish understanding of the non-Jew builds from a understanding of the self as a member of this holy community in contrast with an outside world that lives according to a different (or non-existent)

³ *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, issued in September 2000 by the Jewish Scholars Group, sponsored by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, and its accompanying book, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Oxford: Westview, 2000) was a first attempt at such an understanding.

⁴ The word “Jew” derives primarily from the Greco-Roman designation of the inhabitants of Judaea, the designation of the land of Israel derived from the larger tribe, Judah (the other being Benjamin), of the surviving southern kingdom. Although the term has an authentic Hebrew origin—*yehudi*, meaning “Judah-ite”—it is never the preferred term of Jewish self-designation in its own languages of learning, Hebrew and Aramaic. There, following biblical usage, the people are most commonly designated individually and collectively as Israel, *Yisra’el*, or the children or people of Israel, *B’nei Yisra’el* or *‘Am Yisra’el*. However, it is common in English to reserve “Israelite” for the people of the Hebrew Bible, and “Jew” for the people of the last two millennia. The Hebrew cognate for “Judaism,” as the abstract term for the religion of these people, appears first in medieval philosophical Hebrew, and even there it applies more generally to all aspects of Jewish culture. Note that it is only in this period that Hebrew develops a term for the concept of religion, adapting the meaning of the late biblical *dat* (meaning there, “law,” and appearing only in Esther, Ezra, and Daniel). The separation of Jewish religion (Judaism) from other aspects of culture is a product of modernity and the integration of Jews into Western societies (largely on its terms).

relationship to God.⁵ Modernity has challenged many aspects of this traditional identity, but one cannot understand this challenge without understanding its predecessors.

Modern scholarship also accepts fairly unanimously that per se Judaism is not so much the religion of or contained in the written Bible as it is the religion that lives by the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible, especially its first five books, the Torah, as interpreted by the traditions of the rabbinic “Oral Torah.” The Oral Torah is the ongoing process of interpretation and application of the received written text—embedded in which are infinite possibilities of meaning—so as to sanctify all aspects of life.⁶ As such, biblical conceptions are formative but not always directly normative. Judaism, then, is best understood as one of two successful responses to the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. (the other successful response being Christianity) rather than the biblical religion that preceded this. Hence, while the Bible presents an understanding of Israelite identity vis à vis the external pagan world, this is much less significant to our discussion than the rabbinic interpretations of that text and their resultant rulings, recorded first in the Mishnah and the Talmud, that did become normative for later generations of Jews. From the latter centuries of the first millennium C.E., the Talmud and texts based upon it have been much more determinative of actual Jewish interactions with the non-Jewish world than has been the Bible itself. Hence, our discussion here will refer only obliquely to the biblical period.

By the emergence of rabbinic Judaism in the late Second Temple period, anyone born to a Jewish mother was automatically considered a Jew.⁷ But while this matrilineal descent determined membership in the nation, one’s father’s status determined one’s type of membership. As long as one’s father was himself a Jew and had married appropriately, his children inherited his ritual status in the Temple as a priest (*kohen*), levite, or Isra-

⁵ Joseph Dan, *On Sanctity: Religion, Ethics, and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), especially chap. 1, “Sanctity and Sanctification: Between Judaism and Christianity.”

⁶ The traditions of the Oral Torah did not remain oral, but were eventually codified (perhaps into oral, memorized texts initially) and written down, forming the Mishnah, the Talmud(s), and the various collections of *midrashim*. But the category of Oral Torah remains open, especially to new interpretations and rulings based (ultimately) on these formative works.

⁷ M. I. Gruber, “Matrilineal Determination of Jewishness: Biblical and Near Eastern Roots,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Balls: Studies in Biblical, Jewish and Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature* (Jacob Milgrom Festschrift), ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 437–43. Earlier biblical traditions had assumed patrilineal descent.

elite.⁸ Certain elements of this status remain relevant even today, long after the destruction of the Temple. Thus, while matrilineal and patrilineal descent both play roles in the construction of Jewish society, matrilineal descent is the more fundamental category. Thus, as long as one's mother is a Jew, one is by definition oneself a Jew, a citizen of *'Am Yisra'el*, the people Israel, and a participant in Israel's covenant with God.⁹

At its most fundamental level, this is an irrevocable status. "A Jew, even if he has sinned, is [still] a Jew."¹⁰ There are innumerable longer and shorter definitions of what it means to be a *good* Jew, discussing fundamentals of faith and behavior, but anyone meeting this ethnic/familial/national distinction is, by definition, legally a Jew.¹¹ At the same time, there are certain actions that communities, at one time or another, have

⁸ Rabbinic tradition, Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 69a, includes many more distinctions within these for various sorts of disqualifications from full participation, usually because of improper marriages (within the Jewish community). However, even if one's status as a priest or Israelite includes limitations, even as severe a limitation as exclusion from the community because of bastardy, one is still a Jew. (Indeed, while biblical law, Deuteronomy 23:3 prohibits bastards from joining the community for ten generations, this talmudic passage searches for ways to remove the status.) The categories of priest, levite, and Israelite remain operative in traditional Judaism, preserved in a limited list of ongoing ritual privileges and driven by the ongoing hope for the rebuilding of the Temple.

⁹ Contemporary realities complexify this definition and have been a source of heated discussion in the Jewish world for decades. It presumes a world in which Jews will marry Jews, yet in contemporary America, intermarriage is extremely common. In 1982, the Reform Movement's rabbinical body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, passed a resolution affirming patrilineal descent and allowing that a child of any intermarriage raised with "positive acts of Jewish affirmation" like circumcision, bar or bat mitzvah, and confirmation is considered a Jew. See "The Report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent," *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* 92 (1982) 67–84. The ramifications of this are still being felt, because, while no child of a Jewish mother has been denied status as a Jew because of failure to be raised as a Jew, children of Jewish fathers (and non-Jewish mothers) are not accepted as Jews outside of the liberal movements of Judaism.

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 44a, cited with reference to apostates explicitly in numerous medieval sources. In times of forced (or highly encouraged) baptisms, this was an important internal principle, both regarding the ability of Jews to renounce their baptism and return, and regarding the legal status of their familial and business obligations.

¹¹ This is somewhat parallel to defining Christian identity solely by baptism. Renunciation of baptism, from a Christian perspective, is similarly problematic. However, there is no ritual that makes the child of Jewish parents a Jew. Ritually circumcising a baby boy marks only his entry into God's covenant with Abraham. Failure to do so places his parents and him (upon his majority) in a situation of sin, but does not exclude him from the community. It is important to note, however, that, at the level of popular religion, circumcision does "make him into a Jew."

considered such serious betrayals that they have banned or excommunicated the perpetrators. In today's world, functionally more than officially, one is considered no longer a Jew if one willingly¹² and positively affiliates with another religion. Formal declaration of the fundamental tenets of Islam, baptism into Christianity (even acceptance of Jesus as Messiah as in Jews for Jesus or Messianic Judaism), or active participation in any other religion or religious cult all place one sociologically and according to some, halakhically, outside of the people of Israel.¹³ In other words, one need not accept any element of a creedal statement of Judaism,¹⁴ but one may not affirm the cardinal beliefs of other religious communities where they contradict Jewish teachings.

Examination of the requirements for one who wishes to become a Jew through conversion¹⁵ points to a requirement of stricter conformance with communal ideals. In the traditional world,¹⁶ this entails a process of learn-

¹² Responses historically have been different to those who converted to avoid persecution, confiscation of property, or expulsion (all recurring tropes of the Jewish experience in Christian Europe) than to those who converted out of conviction. Rarely is the first group understood to have lost their status as full members of the Jewish community.

¹³ This has practical implications with regard to the Law of Return of the modern political State of Israel. This law guarantees automatic citizenship to any Jew. The most famous test was the case of Brother Daniel, a Carmelite monk living in Israel and born as the Jew Oswald Rufeisen, who petitioned for citizenship in 1962. The court ruled that while, under halakhah, he was a Jew, the secular state's Law of Return is based "on the Jewish national-historical consciousness and the ordinary secular meaning of the term 'Jew' as understood by Jews." While the state could not require adherence to Jewish religion in any form, it could refuse this privilege of automatic citizenship to those professing other religions. For discussion of this and of the larger (and important) issues lying behind it, see "Apostasy," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD ROM edition. Missionary efforts directed at Jews, particularly by Christians, have created extraordinarily painful chapters in Jewish history. Many individual apostates became the most damaging tools in the hands of the Church. This experience has shaped Jewish aversion to conversion out as an act of basest betrayal, including traditions of mourning the convert as if dead, referring to converts as *meshummadim* (those who should be/ have been destroyed), and to cursing them in medieval liturgies.

¹⁴ Judaism has no official creed. Various creedal statements have been formulated over the centuries, the most well-known of which is the Thirteen Principles of Faith crafted by Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century. It is found in declaratory form (I believe with perfect faith in . . .) and in poetic renditions for daily recitation in traditional prayer books, but it is not among the obligatory prayers.

¹⁵ The English-speaking Jewish world uses the term "conversion" to refer to the ritual act of becoming a Jew. It carries little parallel to the Catholic usage that describes a life-long process of turning to God. The "turning" here is a "turning into" a member of the people Israel. The Hebrew term is *gerut*, derived from the biblical word *ger*, discussed below in n. 26.

¹⁶ "Orthodox," "Conservative," "Reform," etc., are modern designations, arising

ing to live like a Jew and committing oneself to an observant lifestyle. The ritual of conversion begins with a formal examination of one's commitment to live a life according to the Torah and its commandments. While this does not directly address one's theology, it is hard to accept the obligations of Torah observance without also accepting, in one way or another, their divine source. Liberal conversion curricula are less focused on dietary laws and Sabbath observance, devoting instead more energy to general knowledge about Judaism, including theology and history. Thus, while failure to live the life of a "good" Jew does not change the legal status of a born Jew, joining the community does require affirmation of cardinal theological concepts.¹⁷ After examination by the rabbinical court, the actual ritual of conversion involves ritual circumcision (for males—and here it is a critical part of "making a Jew"), immersion in the ritual bath (*mikveh*), and taking on a Jewish identity through a Hebrew name.¹⁸ This name consists of a given name of choice, but instead of the born-Jew's identification as the child of his or her birth parents, the convert is now known as a child of Abraham our father and Sarah our mother, the primeval parents of the nation.¹⁹ Thus, one becomes part of the people Israel, a sort of legal adoption or naturalization.

We know now that in pre-Constantinian late antiquity and even after,

only in the mid-19th century. While non-Orthodox groups do have some degree of institutional identity through their various rabbinic and congregational organizations and seminaries, the Orthodox world is diverse and without central institutions. For our purposes here, it is generally more useful to designate the ends of the spectrum of contemporary Judaism as "traditional," referring to those groups who see themselves in total continuity with 2000 years of rabbinic Judaism, and "liberal," referring to those groups who do not accept the authority of this system in part or in full. Thus, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, as well as parts of the Conservative world can be considered "liberal" (and new groups such as Renewal, New Age, Humanistic Judaism) while the rest from the more conservative end of the Conservative Movement through the ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic may be termed "traditional."

¹⁷ The conversion of a child is not binding until the child reaches religious maturity. However, once a 13-year old boy (or a 12-year old girl, although liberal communities today celebrate bat mitzvah too at age 13) gives evidence of positive identification with the Jewish community, it is understood as a ratification of the parents' decision.

¹⁸ Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 46a–b. For a summary of the laws of conversion, see the entry "Proselytes" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (CD ROM or printed version). This particular usage of the *mikveh* transforms into Christian baptism. A central purpose of ritual immersion in the *mikveh* in the Second Temple period was for the removal of various sorts of ritual impurity that prevented participation in Temple rituals. Ongoing uses include following a menstrual period (for women) and after a seminal emission (for men). The *mikveh*'s waters thus have a transformative effect, but most of its uses respond to regular aspects of life.

¹⁹ Jewish names consist of a given name, followed by "son of" or "daughter of,"

Judaism was extremely attractive to a substantial percentage of the Greco-Roman world. However, the numbers of Gentiles who actually undertook circumcision and the obligations of Sabbath observance were actually many fewer than those who found Judaism otherwise attractive. Without formal conversion, these Gentiles remained outside of Judaism. Was Judaism in this period a missionary religion? Perhaps, for the prophetic visions did include dreams of all nations coming to serve God.²⁰ On the other hand, the Mishnah (ca. 200 C.E.) contains no direct dedicated discussion of proselytism or conversion, suggesting that the topic was not of central concern.²¹ With the Christianization of the Roman empire (and later under Islamic rule also), it became dangerous for Jews to proselytize. Early rabbinic texts teach the obligation to discourage potential converts, accepting candidates only if they demonstrate sincerity by their persistence. They teach:

One who wants to convert should not be accepted immediately; rather we say to him, "Why should you want to convert? Do you not see that this nation is more lowly and punished than all other nations, that many diseases and tortures befall them, they bury their children and grandchildren, they are killed for circumcising and immersing and performing the rest of the commandments, and they cannot live their lives publicly like the rest of the nations?" If he says, "I am not worthy to place my neck in the yoke [of the commandments] of the One who Spoke and Created the World, Blessed be He," they accept him immediately, and if not, he should go on his way.²²

In other words, converts are welcome, but only if they willingly and knowingly accept the implications of their decisions.

The degree to which Judaism actively sought converts through the ages is a matter of dispute. There is little evidence in Jewish sources that the rabbis taught that God wants the world to be Jewish and that to seek

followed by the parents' first names. Family names, while common in different parts of the Jewish world in different times, are external to this system.

²⁰ For a summary of the evidence and of earlier discussions, see Wolf Liebeschuetz, "The Influence of Judaism Among Non-Jews in the Imperial Period," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 52 (2001) 235–52.

²¹ In contrast to the Babylonian Talmud which addresses the question directly in Yevamot 46a ff. and parallels. Note, however, that the only "life cycle" event to which the Mishnah pays sustained attention is marriage and divorce—in immense detail, largely because of the financial and personal status issues involved. Birth-related rituals receive attention only in the Talmud and there peripherally. Bar mitzvah is a medieval development. Death receives substantial discussion but scattered through various tractates on other subjects. Hence the argument from silence may not be significant.

²² Massekhet Gerim 1:1; the parallel tannaitic tradition (i.e., an anonymous tradition ascribed to the first two centuries C.E.) in Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 47a is somewhat less graphic.

converts is to do God's will. However, numerous Jewish, pagan, and Christian sources from late antiquity suggest that, at times, there were substantial numbers of Gentiles who became Jews, although not always under rabbinic auspices.²³ As Christianity and then Islam became powerful, accepting converts into Judaism became increasingly dangerous. Even today, traditional Judaism tends to be adamantly non-missionary, resisting all but the most determined converts, deferring visions of universal service of God to the future messianic times.²⁴ More liberal branches of American Judaism, largely in response to life in a society where the social barriers to interreligious marriage have broken down, have in recent decades begun aggressively to seek converts among those marrying or married to Jews.²⁵ Almost all traditions stress that the convert, once converted properly, is a Jew in all respects, not to be reminded of his or her origins. In other words, conversion is an effective and full naturalization into the ethnos of Israel, the transformation of the individual into "one of us."

THE NON-JEWISH WORLD THROUGH TRADITIONAL JEWISH EYES

In the view of the Bible and consequently in subsequent Jewish literature, the world consists first of "us," Israel, and then of "them," everyone

²³ For a detailed survey of the evidence through the fifth century C.E., see Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993) chaps. 9–11. Feldman argues strongly that Jews were indeed actively proselytizing in this period. However, he does not distinguish consistently between rabbinic and non-rabbinic Jewish cultures and among different geographic areas where the social realities may have varied.

²⁴ Under the leadership of the late Rabbi Alexander Schindler, the American Reform movement altered this position somewhat. The Union of American Hebrew Congregation's Outreach Commission began its work in answer to the challenges created by intermarriage, seeking to encourage conversion to Judaism by those marrying or married to Jews. This has broadened into a general welcoming of conversion. See their webpages, <http://uahc.org/outreach>. While other movements may be less forthright about it, they have also come to welcome converts in unprecedented numbers in recent years.

²⁵ This is perhaps a natural outgrowth of liberal Judaism's 19th-century justification of diaspora life, claiming that God scattered Israel throughout the world so that it might "bear the word of God to the corners of the earth," setting an example that would lead to the fulfillment of Israel's messianic dreams of a perfected society. This theology developed, on the one hand, as a rejection of the traditional understanding of diaspora existence as exile and punishment, and on the other hand, as an attempt to understand the role of Judaism as a religion among other religions in a mission-oriented Christian world that was finally granting Jews civil rights. See the discussion in Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 138, citing David Einhorn, 1845 Frankfurt rabbinic conference. See also the other entries under "mission" in his index.

else, the nations (*goyim*). These categories are mutually exclusive and are expected to remain so for the foreseeable future.²⁶ In the biblical world, these nations were uniformly idolatrous. While the Bible may grant these nations some elements of distinct identities based on their historical political and military interactions with Israel, theologically they are all total outsiders, uniform in their failure to recognize Israel's God. Struggles to wean Israelites from the attractions of idolatrous worship—whether a perversion of the worship of Israel's God or direct participation in non-Israelite cults—fill large sections of the historical narrative of the Bible and provide fuel for prophetic ire. But the biblical command is clear: Israel will be cursed for following the gods of other nations (Deuteronomy 11:28); in the conquest of the land, Israel is to destroy utterly the sites of idol worship in it (Deuteronomy 12:2–3); and to take care not to worship God on pagan models (Deuteronomy 12:30–13:1); to punish with immediate death both anyone who attempts to lead Israelites into idolatrous practices (Deuteronomy 13:7–12) and the community who follows the traitor (Deuteronomy 13:13–19).²⁷

The rabbis of the Talmud understood that, during the Second Temple period, Jews had ceased to be tempted by idolatry.²⁸ However, they were also very aware that much of their contemporary surrounding cultures' ritual practices, many aspects of which were very attractive to many Jews, still met the Bible's definition of idolatry. The rabbis absolutely prohibited any interaction with Gentiles that might involve a Jew in idolatry, even indirectly. They prohibited Jews not only from directly and deliberately practicing idolatry themselves, but also even from accidentally behaving in any way that might be interpreted as the practice of idolatry²⁹ or from

²⁶ One in an intermediate status between the two was termed a *ger* (stranger). Eventually, Judaism distinguished between a *ger zedeq* (literally “a righteous stranger,” a convert) and a *ger toshav* (a resident stranger, often one who took on a degree of Jewish practice but did not convert), the second being the more common biblical use of the term. A recurrent trope in Torah is the command that one be concerned for the *ger* “because you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt.” See Exodus 22:26, 23:9; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19. For a discussion of these concepts, including their overlap with the Hellenistic “God fearers,” see David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1983) 14–28.

²⁷ Compare, for example, Exodus 23:13, 23–24, 32–33; Leviticus 20:1–6, 22–23. Punishment for failure to obey these commandments is a recurrent trope, for example, in Judges (2:1–4; 6:7–10) and Kings (1 Kings 12:28–14:19; 18:20 ff.), and in the literary prophets (Isaiah 2:6–9, Jeremiah 2–3) among other texts.

²⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b and parallels. This assertion is hard to support, except from the lack of diatribes against Jewish idolatry in the Second Temple period. See “Idolatry,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

²⁹ For instance, the Mishnah prohibits entering a place—a city or a part of a

indirectly causing a non-Jew to perform an act of idolatry.³⁰ The rabbis wanted to create significant barriers to social and economic interaction between Jews and non-Jews, idealizing and intensifying their sense that Israel, for self-preservation, needed to stand apart.³¹ Although rabbinic influence in these areas may have only gradually shaped actual Jewish life, increasing religious, political, and economic marginalization of Jews by Christian rulers may well have helped Jews to accept this rabbinic view of their ideal relationship to the world. In other words, the available tradition became a way of understanding and justifying an unpleasant reality.

On the other hand, the economic health of the Jewish community, also a rabbinic concern (as part of the sanctification of all aspects of life already discussed), demanded that Jews be able to function within the greater societies in which they lived. The rabbis were cognizant that if their interpretations of Torah became overly restrictive, to the point that people could not possibly prosper, Torah would no longer be a source of life, contradicting the meta-halakhic principle derived from Deuteronomy 30:15 that a choice to live by Torah must be a choice that promotes life. Thus, theoretical theological positions and reality exist in an acknowledged tension that generate creative applications of (biblical) principles so as to ameliorate Torah's restrictions. In our case, almost from the beginning, while establishing firm restrictions on dealings with idolaters, the rabbis find ways to exclude the Gentiles among whom they live from this category, particularly where it affected the economic life of the Jewish community. The theological position never really changes: traditional halakhah retains a rather broad definition of "idolatrous" religious practices in which Jews may not participate in any way. However, the rabbis come to understand many Gentile religious practices as permitted, i.e., not idolatrous, for

city—in which there is idolatry (Avodah Zara 1:4); the talmudic comment on this warns against any temptation to bend over, even to remove a splinter from one's foot, to take a drink of water, or to pick up spilled coins, in the presence of an idol, lest it appear that one is bowing to it (Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zara 12a).

³⁰ Classic examples of this include the prohibition on doing business with Gentiles on the days prior to their festivals, lest they give thanks to their gods on their festival for their profits (Mishnah Avodah Zara 1:1–3) and a prohibition on business dealings that might generate an oath in which the pagan invokes his gods (Babylonian Talmud Bekhorot 2b; Sanhedrin 63b).

³¹ Archeological evidence from the Land of Israel as well as non-Jewish literary evidence suggests that this was more a rabbinic ideal than the social reality. Current scholarship suggests that Jews and Romans, and later, Jews and Christians mixed fairly freely into at least the fourth century. See, for instance, the summary of evidence in Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1999), especially his introduction.

the Gentiles themselves, thus easing the restrictions on at least economic relationships between Jew and Gentile.

NON-JEWS AS NOAHIDES

Their interpretation of the Bible also led the rabbis to another, potentially more positive, understanding of the non-Jew. According to Genesis, all humanity is descended not just from Adam and Eve, but more specifically, from Noah and his sons. Therefore, all humanity, Jews and non-Jews, are of common descent, biologically (and hence spiritually) distinguished from any other creation by their creation in the divine image. The rabbis understood that God had communicated a specific set of expectations to this pre-Israelite humanity, expectations that hold for all its descendents. The nations (*goyim*) fulfill God's will and are considered righteous when they accept what the rabbis term the seven Noahide laws. Israel's distinctiveness within this humanity consists in the fact that first under Abraham and then under Moses, she received further promises and covenants from God, making her responsible for a more complex and demanding set of responsibilities, conceptualized as 613 commandments. Israel's chosenness is thus not a chosenness for reward or special salvation, but a chosenness for special, loving, service to God.

The earliest known text of the Noahide laws, composed by the third century C.E., reads:

The children of Noah were commanded concerning seven commandments: about adjudication; and about idolatry; and about blasphemy; and about sexual immorality; and about murder; and about robbery; [and about eating a limb from a living animal].³²

David Novak points out that this tradition represents a new situation in which there is no longer an intermediate status, like the Second Temple period "god-fearer" or "resident stranger" (*ger toshav*), between Jew and Gentile. Jews are subject to all of Torah; Gentiles are subject to this shorter

³² Tosefta Avodah Zarah 8:4. The seventh commandment is missing from Zuckerman's primary manuscript, but is one of the commandments explicitly given to Noah by God (Genesis 9:4). The Tosefta's continuation, attempting to explain each one of these commandments, devotes a long discussion to this (missing) prohibition, suggesting scribal error in the manuscript. Note that later rabbinic texts derive the first six of these commandments from Genesis 2:16, God's commands to Adam, leaving only the seventh as a specific command to the Noahides (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 56b and parallels). For discussions of the Noahide Laws, see Novak, *Image*, or his summation of this work in his *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University, 1989) chap. 1, pp. 26–41. See also Saul Berman and Steven S. Schwartzchild, "Noachide Laws," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

and older list of commandments. Jews and Gentiles are differently commanded in their paths to holiness.³³

How can we understand this concept? It is critical to state here the obvious: the concept of Noahide laws operates according to the most fundamental theological category of rabbinic Judaism and applies this *modus operandi* to the rest of the world. This is a functional equivalent to the Christian assertion that all people, even if they do not know it, are saved only through Christ—Christianity's fundamental theological category. For Jews, proper behavior before God is defined first and foremost by the terms of Israel's covenant with God, the Torah. The terms of that covenant are spelled out in the details of the *mitzvot* (commandments), given by God, and ideally obeyed from a love of God. These commandments structure an individual and communal existence in which God is a partner; the parameters of the resultant culture set the terms of Jewish theological discourse. Because God gave the Torah specifically to Israel and not to the rest of the world, Judaism cannot suggest that God wants the rest of the world to be bound by all its terms. However, God's pre-Sinai demands of humanity did contain a shorter list of commandments, which include prohibitions of the cardinal sins of murder, sexual immorality,³⁴ and idolatry.³⁵ These, then, set the standard of proper behavior, the *mitzvot*, for the rest of humanity—and Judaism easily finds such legal directives in the teachings of most world religions. Thus, the traditional Jewish view of the non-Jew emerges from the categories of Judaism's own understanding of its relationship with God. To pre-modern Jews, this understanding of the world was self-evident and usually subconscious. It is only in our times that we can question whether the conceptual categories framing the Noahide laws impose a cultural construct that is incomprehensible or inappropriate for our non-Jewish neighbors. However, these laws remain a critical part of Jewish heritage. The challenge is to reinterpret them today.

From an internal Jewish perspective, these Noahide laws had the practical effect of creating a yardstick by which to categorize the nations and assess the degree of possible Jewish co-existence with them. People who accepted upon themselves these commandments were *ipso facto* righteous and their communities civilized. This created the possibility of economic and political cooperation as well as, possibly, cultural exchange and dialogue. Most Gentiles with whom Jews lived easily met four of these requirements. They had governments with a system of justice; they consid-

³³ Novak, *Image* 25–34. Novak's historical reconstruction of the emergence of this concept is inconsistent with the understanding of Boyarin and others that the real separation of the communities only occurred in the third or fourth centuries, a date not inconsistent with the redaction of the Tosefta text.

³⁴ The reference is to incest and adultery.

³⁵ All other commandments are negotiable in order to save a human life.

ered murder, robbery, and sexual immorality to be criminal activities. More critical were the questions of idolatry and its attendant crimes of blaspheming God and making offerings from living animals.³⁶

As Novak points out, there are two ways of understanding the Noahide laws. Either they are a system that Jews use for governing other nations, or they represent a philosophical-theological ideal that nations should fulfill of their own choice. Obviously, there have been very few occasions in the past two millennia in which the first was anything more than a theoretical consideration, as Jews were not a sovereign nation from the Roman conquest until 1948, and even the contemporary state of Israel is fundamentally a secular state, governed by religious law only on questions of personal status for Jews. Israeli law does not specifically invoke anyone's Noahide status. Non-Jews are subject to civil law like anyone else, but unlike Jews, they can choose what religious or secular laws will govern their marriages, conversions, and burials. Thus, in any practical, non-eschatological terms, these laws need to be considered under the second category, as something akin to natural law.³⁷

But this concept did have a practical effect. In their centuries living as a minority group, where economic issues were concerned, Jews were able to overcome the halakhic prohibitions against interacting with idolaters by understanding their neighbors to be operating within categories permitted to Noahides. The talmudic rabbis themselves understood pagan Romans to be merely participants in ancestral custom, and not actual believers when participating in ostensibly idolatrous rites. Because they were understood to intend worship of God through these rites, they were not true idolaters.³⁸ Current state of the evidence does not allow us to determine whether rabbinic Judaism developed a more specific theological response to the increasingly dominant Christianity. Rabbinic texts consistently present the Byzantine Empire as "Rome," making no distinction based on religion. The Gentile nature of Pauline Christianity, the development of trinitarian theology, particularly with the concomitant emergence of a rich iconogra-

³⁶ Novak suggests that rabbinic reaction to the pagan sacrificial custom of tearing the heart out of a living animal generated the otherwise anomalous inclusion of the prohibition of eating a limb from a living animal in this list (*Image* 240–41).

³⁷ Novak develops this theme in detail in his *Natural Law in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University, 1998) especially chap. 6, "Noahide Law and Human Personhood," 149–73.

³⁸ Novak, *Image* 124–29. There is no question that this category applies to Christians and Muslims, the peoples with whom Jews have had the most significant interactions historically. Asian religions, with the exception of some forms of Buddhism, potentially provide much deeper challenges because of their polytheism and idolatry. It is likely that were significant centers of Jewish civilization to come to have regular contact with adherents of these traditions, ways would be found to define them as Noahides too.

phy, made it difficult for Jews to accept Christians as monotheists and non-idolaters. Jews probably felt no need to develop a new category to accommodate Christian reality.³⁹

The Jewish encounter with Islam's radical monotheism probably created opportunity for the expansion and increased importance of the concept of the Noahides. In the Muslim world, from Persia to Spain, Jewish cultural interactions with their Muslim neighbors reached enormous heights. The coincidence that the administrative center of the Muslim world moved to Baghdad in 762, near the leading rabbinic academies dedicated to study and teaching of talmudic law, contributed greatly to the world-wide dominance of the now codified Babylonian Talmud's understandings of Judaism, including its teachings about the Noahides and idolatry.

As Jews in medieval Europe gained in intellectual sophistication and simultaneously began to interpret these talmudic traditions to fit their world, leading rabbis confronted the challenge presented by Christianity.⁴⁰ On the surface, it remained obvious that Christianity was idolatrous. But it was an economic and social necessity that Jews in Europe be able to do business with Christians without concern that Jews might cause Christians to perform idolatrous actions forbidden to them as Noahides. Therefore, acting on the principle that Torah cannot mean to force people into abject poverty and that it was their mandate to find new interpretations, leading rabbis of the twelfth century and later sought a new understanding of Christianity that would circumvent talmudic restrictions.⁴¹ Rabbenu Tam taught that Christian religious imagery was not itself an object of worship,

³⁹ A full exploration of this statement requires understanding the complex interactions between Jews and Christians in the first three or four centuries of their evolutions into mature religious systems. Undoubtedly, they did influence one another, positively and negatively, and we know that, on the one hand, there was sufficient social and cultural intermingling to elicit strident opposition from both the rabbis and persons such as John Chrysostom, and, on the other hand, significant scholarly interchanges by men such as Origen and his rabbinic contemporaries. However, theological understandings of the "other" do not always play out on the street, for better or for worse.

⁴⁰ Literary records from the Rhineland indicate that serious engagement with talmudic traditions began there at the earliest in the tenth century—and these records indicate a reasonable struggle against the Babylonian geonic authorities who stood behind the Talmud. These schools dominated Christian Europe until the massacres of these communities in the First Crusade. A leading student of these schools, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi, d. 1105) had fortuitously founded his own school in northern France, in Troyes, a generation earlier. His grandsons began the Tosafist movement which sought to resolve contradictions between talmudic teachings and actual European practice, including the rulings which cast Christians into the category of idolaters.

⁴¹ On the Tosafist methodology on this question, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Progress and Tradition in Medieval Ashkenaz," *Jewish History* 14 (2000) 300. It

and that prayers directed to saints or even the Trinity were ultimately really directed to God—just in a mediated fashion that, while forbidden to Jews, could be allowed for Gentiles. Therefore, causing someone to swear an oath invoking these names did not constitute the forbidden act of indirectly encouraging idolatry.⁴² As oaths were a central aspect of medieval business practice, this ruling had significant economic implications in a world where Jewish sources of income were increasingly restricted by church (or church-encouraged) policies. This ruling also created the foundation for even more open acceptance of Christians as full, moral, law-abiding Noahides in later medieval thought.⁴³

Up to this point, the categories I have discussed do not distinguish, in theory, between one “nation” and another. However, some influential sages do acknowledge positively both Islam’s pure monotheism and Christianity’s use of the Old Testament. Maimonides (d. 1205, Cairo) taught in a passage censored by the Church because it begins by discounting any chance that Jesus was the Messiah:

All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite who came after him, only served to clear the way for the king Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord Thus the Messianic hope, the Torah and the commandments have become familiar topics . . . [among] many peoples uncircumcised of heart and flesh.⁴⁴

Thus, Maimonides understood that God sent Jesus (and Muhammad) as part of the preparation for the Messianic age, the period of salvation in which righteous Noahides would participate.

To balance this survey, brief mention must be made of the fact that, where Christian censorship allowed, Jewish portrayal of Christians and Christianity (and to a lesser extent Muslims) was overwhelmingly negative, including the occasional, mostly passing, mentions in the liturgy. This arose as a response to living in a world where the Christian Church marginalized, denigrated, and persecuted Jews, to the point of expulsions, massacres, limitations on livelihood, and constant pressure to convert. There was no

must also be asked to what extent Jews transferred to Christian Europe patterns of interaction they had come to cherish in the Muslim empire.

⁴² Tosafot, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 63b, s.v. “asur” and parallels. See the discussion of this passage in Novak, *Image* 130–35; and *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* 42–53.

⁴³ See Novak’s discussion of Menahem Ha-Meiri’s understanding, *Image*, 351–56 (and of developments up through modernity in the sections and chapters that follow; *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* 53–56). The Meiri acknowledges that Christian acceptance upon themselves of the obligation to follow additional commandments of Torah beyond the Noahide laws is legitimate positive religious expression.

⁴⁴ Mishneh Torah, Law of Kings, chap. 11, end. See Novak, *Images* 134–42 who discusses all the relevant Maimonidean texts.

incentive for premodern Jews in Christian lands to develop a positive theology of the religious other.

JEWISH ESCHATOLOGY AND THE NON-JEW

The various Catholic documents to which the articles in this journal's theme issue respond have at their heart the question of whether and how salvation can be achieved or fully achieved without Christian faith and Christian institutions. The fundamental question by which these documents and much of Christian teaching judges the religious "other" is: "Does that religion's structures and beliefs create the conditions for the salvation of its adherents?" As we have seen, traditional Judaism's fundamental question is instead: "Does the religion's structures allow its members to fulfill God's commandments, the Noahide laws?" If so, and if the adherents of such a religion follow its teachings, then they are among the *ḥasidei 'umot ha'olam* (the righteous/saintly of the nations of the world)⁴⁵ i.e., they are good, moral human beings before God. Consequently, (1) we can live together productively in this world; and less importantly, (2) the righteous, Jew and non-Jew, can expect to have a "share in the world to come." This, translated into Christian terminology, means that righteous Noahides will be saved.⁴⁶ There is, thus, no necessary connection between Israel's chosen status and salvation, although most theories about the nature of salvation do visualize it in Judeo-centric terms.

There is no single understanding of salvation in Judaism. Neil Gillman succinctly summarizes one classic view as follows:

... that at the end of days, the dead will be resurrected and come before God to account for their lives on earth, that the righteous will be rewarded and the evil punished; that Jews, free from the yoke of the exile, will return to their homeland, rebuild it, and become masters of their own destiny; that they will rebuild the Temple and reinstitute the Temple cult; that the nations of the world will flock to study Torah with the Jewish people; that peace and justice will rule; that "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb" (Isaiah 11:6); and that all people will come to know and worship the God of Israel. Finally, this entire scenario will be brought to pass

⁴⁵ Those non-Jews who helped save Jews during the Holocaust are celebrated officially in Israel today as "righteous Gentiles."

⁴⁶ Because of its heavy Christian overtones, English discourse about Jewish eschatology tends to avoid the word "save" and its cognates, substituting "redeem" and its cognates. Hebrew does employ at least three separate terms for this concept, the roots Y-SH- (from which comes the name Yehoshua, Joshua, and its Greek cognate Jesus, Yeshua for short), G-'-L, and less commonly, P-D-H. All appear biblically, rabbinically, and liturgically with reference to God's actions at the Exodus and with reference to God's future saving/redemption of Israel.

through the initiative of a charismatic or quasi-divine figure called the Messiah (literally, “the anointed one”).⁴⁷

Gillman does not mention “the world to come,” likely because rabbinic texts use two discrete sets of language and their point of overlap is ambiguous. The Messiah will come at the “end of days”—the prophetic terminology—and this will spell the beginning of end of “this world,” i.e., human history as we know it. This will usher in an idyllic period *on earth* in which rightful political and religious structures will flourish in Israel at least, probably preceded by resurrection and judgment. Gentiles participate in this scenario as Gentiles; but as Noahides, they are in relationship with God. It is not clear that this scenario will extend into eternity. Some understand the “world to come” to be the eternity that follows the messianic age; others understand it to be the reward of the individual after death (and before resurrection).

Note too that “sin” has not entered our discussion. Judaism understands that those same aspects of humanity that make them capable of sin are also those aspects that drive humans to necessary and good achievements. The human task is to channel this “evil inclination”—to sexuality and love, to acquisition—so that it is productive and not sinful. Any outside or divine intervention that changed this structure would also destroy civilization, for people would cease to marry and reproduce, build homes, or conduct business.⁴⁸ Thus, humans who strive for righteous living and repent when they err can presume that they will be rewarded in the eschatological scenario.

Although eschatological hopes permeate Jewish liturgy and are ever present, particularly in times of trouble, eschatological discourse drives little of non-mystical Judaism. The rabbis often threaten that particular actions will guarantee or deny someone a place in the world to come, but their purpose is consistently to spur people to proper behavior in this world, rather than to make any real statement about eternity. God has redeemed Israel in the past, from Egypt, and promises future redemption. Its details have not been given to us, while Torah’s definitions of how to live in this world have. To the extent that redemption is dependent on human behavior, then, our responsibility is to determine precisely how to

⁴⁷ *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997) 21–22.

⁴⁸ Genesis Rabbah 9:7 (and parallels), in a commentary on the application of “very good” to the creation of humanity. See also the entries “Sin,” section on Rabbinic Views, and “Inclination, Good and Evil” in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. The classic manifestations of the “evil inclination” listed here are not in and of themselves sinful; rather, they carry the potential for sin when unrestrained (and even, according to some, when overrestrained).

live according to God's will in this world.⁴⁹ Therefore, the most privileged mode of discourse in traditional Judaism is halakhic.

MODERNITY'S CHALLENGES TO THIS STRUCTURE

However, to be accepted into Western society, Jews were asked to (and many sought to) break down many of their own barriers to intermingling with Christians and to lose their distinctiveness. In response, new forms of Judaism emerged, some of which challenged the very presuppositions of traditional Jewish life. In its most radical form, Reform Judaism, coming into its own in Germany by the mid-19th century, taught a pure ethical monotheism, a prophetic Judaism, in which Jews understood themselves as commissioned by God to set an example of moral behavior, but not to structure their lives by incomprehensible commandments that prevented their full participation in greater society. If their world was no longer governed by *mitzvot*, categorizing non-Jews by their performance of them, even if they were all "ethical commandments" made little sense. However, theological rigor has rarely characterized Reform decisions and it developed no new theology of other religions.⁵⁰ In the 20th century, Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, explicitly rejected concepts of Jewish chosenness.⁵¹ In both these movements, among secular Jews, and to a certain extent among Jews even further along the continuum towards traditional practice, Torah and its commandments, or the traditional understanding of these concepts, no longer set the parameters of the culture that defined Jewish identity. In generations where Jews, while participating in the cultural diversity of Western society, have simultaneously felt their very survival as a people threatened by anti-Semitism, genocide, assimilation, and intermarriage, there has been significant discussion of how to construct Jewish identity. However, the experience, particularly of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust and of Israel's constant struggles for existence in a hostile Arab world, has not generally encouraged interest in the development of positive theologies of the religious other.

⁴⁹ Kabbalistic traditions go beyond this to specify the precise effects on the divine realm of the performance of the various commandments in this world. Particularly in some later forms of kabbalah, the intent behind performance of the commandments is explicitly to effect redemption.

⁵⁰ See my article, "Theologies of Self and Other in American Jewish Liturgies," forthcoming in the *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly*. This article documents the utter confusion on this issue in Reform liturgies.

⁵¹ See the various references to "chosen people," according to the index, in his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1934) especially chap. 19, "Cultural Nationalism as the Call of the Spirit."

However, the contemporary situation is substantially different from the medieval world. In spite of a burgeoning anti-Semitism, especially in Europe and in the Muslim world (as of this writing), many Jews, especially in America, rarely experience the Christian as truly other. Religion is marginalized in our secular society, and for virtually the first time in the history of Christianity, there are essentially no challenges to economic and social interchange, or even to intermarriage.⁵² Most significantly, official theological statements of the Catholic Church (beginning with *Nostra aetate* in 1965 and further refined in a series of additional documents) and various Protestant churches have begun the process of revising the Christian theology of Jews and Judaism.⁵³ But much work remains to be done in the implementation of this new theology at all levels. As the series of documents addressed in this issue of *Theological Studies* demonstrate, the implications of these changes have not been internalized at the highest levels of the Church.

Of these documents, only *Dominus Iesus*, perhaps because it received so much media attention, elicited significant Jewish response. The outcry among those participating in dialogue with Catholics has resulted in a series of clarifications, including from various cardinals,⁵⁴ clarifications that would have been unnecessary had the original document(s) been framed with the fruits of almost 40 years of theological revision in mind. These clarifications make explicit that for Catholic theology, Judaism is not an “other religion,” but rather a religion based on God’s biblical covenant with Israel. If God promised Israel salvation, and if divine promises are true, then the religion of Israel is a true religion and a source of salvation for its adherents. This effectively removes Judaism from the realm of discourse of these documents.⁵⁵

⁵² Intermarriage with non-Jews is not accepted in traditional Judaism and is not officially condoned by any movement. However, in the freedom of American society, the intermarriage rate approaches 50%, indicating a broad social acceptance of the phenomenon.

⁵³ The most up-to-date collection of these documents, from both international and national church bodies, can be found at <http://www.bc.edu/cjlearning>.

⁵⁴ See the articles by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (“The Heritage of Abraham: The Gift of Christmas,” *Osservatore Romano*, English edition, December 29, 2000); Cardinal Edward Cassidy, “The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations in the Light of the Visit of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land,” address delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, Jerusalem, March 13, 2001; and Cardinal Walter Kasper, “Dominus Iesus,” no. 2, address delivered at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York, May 1, 2001. The articles are posted at www.bc.edu/cjlearning.

⁵⁵ The document “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” issued jointly in August 2002, by the United States Bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreli-

These changes in the Catholic and broader Christian worlds now challenge Jews to respond. A serious inner-Jewish dialogue on constructing an appropriate theology of other religions and particularly of Christianity is only in its infancy.⁵⁶ A group of Jewish scholars took a critical step to enlarge this discussion with the publication in September 2000 of a brief text called “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*,” accompanied by a book of essays, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*.⁵⁷ At conference after conference over the past several years, leading thinkers have called for the development of rigorous theological statements.

At this point, I can only tentatively suggest some of the points and issues that such a theology might address. No doubt, others will disagree, but only with discussion can a consensus begin to emerge. For better or worse, Judaism lacks structures of authority that can demand broad deference and impose theological change. The emerging theology of the religious other builds on and reinterprets the traditional understandings outlined above.⁵⁸ The starting point remains that Judaism itself is the specific relationship with God of a particular community, the people of Israel.⁵⁹ God, the cre-

gious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues, articulated these issues, for the first time, in a formal manner. Discussion of the issues raised there is still in its infancy. See the document itself and Cardinal Walter Kasper’s response to it (November 6, 2002) at www.bc.edu/cjlearning. However, this document does not present any precedents of value for developing a positive Catholic theology of the other religions of the world. Particularly, because I think that a theology of other religions in general must be prior to specific theological understandings of individual religions, I am not entirely satisfied with the theoretical underpinnings (as opposed to the practical effects) of this Catholic move. A Jewish theology cannot fully mirror this sense of special relationship beyond an acknowledgment of the biblical foundations of Christianity.

⁵⁶ Note, too, that there are essentially no positive premodern systematic statements of Jewish thought on this issue. The sources cited above are mostly isolated comments. In part, Christian censorship limited the ability of Jewish writers to publish anything substantive about Christianity, particularly if it contained a whiff of criticism. Most texts known today have been recovered from long-lost medieval manuscripts. In part too, systematic theological reflection, compared to halakhic discussion and exegesis of text, was not a particularly privileged mode in much of the Jewish world. Maimonides’s prestige arose from his halakhic writings, not from his philosophical (and controversial) *Guide of the Perplexed*.

⁵⁷ The statement can be found in the book and, with its signatories, at www.icjs.org. Critical discussion of the statement has begun too. See Jon D. Levenson, “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Commentary* 112:3 (December 2001) 31–37 and the ensuing letters in the March 2002 issue. See also the October 2002 articles by David Berger and Michael Signer on the document, posted at www.bc.edu/cjlearning.

⁵⁸ Consensus demands this, for traditional Jews reinterpret but do not make radical ideological breaks from tradition.

⁵⁹ Secular Jews may object to this definition, but a theology cannot exclude God.

ator of all humanity, without compromising divine truth, enters into relationship differently with different nations. Therefore, a people's salvation, or their moral status in this world, is never dependent on their becoming Jews, but rather on their coming to God through their own paths.⁶⁰ Not all aspects of these paths are appropriate or permitted for Jews, for we cannot jettison the traditional, biblically generated concerns about Jewish participation in idolatry—but we can build on the medieval understanding that some behaviors that are permitted to Noahides are nevertheless idolatrous for Jews.⁶¹ Within this, Jews understand their tradition of “chosenness” not to imply superiority or an exclusive relationship to God, but to be a definition of their particular relationship to God among many others.⁶²

This allows us to broaden our concept of the Noahide commandments, understanding it to be only the *minimum* standard of morality for all humanity. Judaism can value, positively, that the teachings of individual world religions exceed this minimum. This, then, allows for Judaism to differentiate between the various religions, to grant them their own theological uniqueness, to recognize them in their individuality in a way not systematically possible when all religions are categorized as generically “Noahide.” At the same time, the relativism of this theology does not compromise divine Truth, for Judaism makes universalist claims only about the existence of God, the Creator, and God's fundamental demands of humanity as expressed in the Noahide laws. God apparently values human diversity!

Thus, Judaism's starting point as the specific relationship of God with a specific group of people allows for significantly different teachings about

Because most other religious communities do not understand themselves as ethnic communities, it is the religious aspects of Judaism that must be in dialogue with them. Failure to acknowledge this (on both sides) has been a source of friction in the relations between the secular state of Israel and the Vatican.

⁶⁰ This language is consistent with kabbalistic understanding attributed to the 16th-century R. Isaac Luria that Jews too, based on their tribal heritage, have their own proper paths to God. This justifies, in this tradition, the existence of varying liturgical rites. See, for instance, Avraham Gombiner's 17th-century *Magen 'Avraham*, Orah Hayyim 68.

⁶¹ For instance, praying to God through any intermediary, be it a saint or even Jesus, with or without the presence of an image, is unquestionably forbidden worship (under the biblical category of idolatry) for Jews—but medieval Jews determined that Noahides were forbidden only to worship other gods, without limitations on how they could worship God.

⁶² On this, see Raphael Jospe, “Chosenness in Judaism: Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity” in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, ed. Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University; 2001) 173-94.

the theological status of other peoples than does Christianity's teaching that its way is the universally true path to salvation. From a Jewish perspective, such an assertion is actually a limitation on God's omnipotence, a suggestion that God can only operate in a single way in the world. Judaism can understand other religions, and especially Christianity and Islam, also to be God's communications of divine will to the world. As long as their adherents behave morally to other human beings, to God, and to themselves, they "have a share in the world to come."