incarnation. Wolfson wrote of the imaginal body that is constructed through the act of imagining God's form in prayer. This body has a reality that, following Corbin, Wolfson termed "imaginal." This imaginal body is the suggested expression of incarnational thinking in Judaism. I find Wolfson's suggestion problematic, in the present context. A body that exists only in an imaginal state may have reality, but it does not have flesh, nor can it be the subject of a story or activity, such that the Christian might recognize in it a meaningful parallel to the incarnation.

E. Lorberbaum: The Iconic Image of God in Humankind

One final reference to recent scholarship is to Yair Lorberbaum's book, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah*.[31] Lorberbaum makes the striking and original claim that the image of God in tannaitic literature has an iconic sense. The human body is an extension of the divine form. Thus, every human would be an extension of the divine presence. Lorberbaum does not speak of incarnation. He is concerned with the meaning the tannaim found in the *zelem*, the image of God, not in God's own intentions. However, if his thesis is meant to explain the meaning of *zelem*, then it also sheds light on God's intention in Gen. 1:26 —God's decision to make humankind in God's image. According to Lorberbaum's suggestion, God is, in fact, deciding to incarnate. God's presence is being extended to every human individual. When we see a human, we see God incarnate. Of all recent suggestions, I believe this one comes the closest to a sense of incarnation that is meaningful to the present conversation. However, we should recall that iconic is not incarnational.[32] Iconic assumes a drawing of a presence and a reality into an icon, which is, in and of itself, of a different nature. Incarnation, by contrast, assumes the complete adoption of a form. Human beings may extend the presence of God in the same way that the icon may capture the presence of that which it represents. However, an icon is not the reality it presents, nor is the human God. The case of the incarnation, however, is precisely that: A human being is God. To my mind, Lorberbaum makes the most significant contribution to the bridging of the gap, though the gap remains.[33]

VI. Incarnation in Judaism—Some New Suggestions

A. The Names of God

Here I would like to introduce into the discussion some new ideas and precedents of particular Judaisms, or strands of Jewish thought, that can meaning-

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[31]Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Press, 2004). An English translation is forthcoming.

[32]Cf., however, the use of the identical parable in the midrash to account for the creation in the image and, in Athanasius, to account for the incarnation. See Lorberbaum, "*Imago Dei*," p. 172.

[33]To this I might add that on several fundamental matters I differ with Lorberbaum, as spelled out in my article, "The Body as Image of God."

fully speak an incarnational language. I would like to present two lines of thinking, both of which are rooted in the Jewish mystical tradition. In thinking of the incarnating presence we might think of soul, person, etc., as expressions of God. Within the kabbalistic tradition we can think of God through the power of God's name. The name of God is the reality and the presence of God. According to kabbalistic theory, the world is made up of names, which are the inner reality and essence of all of creation. We should also note that ritual reality—the mitzvot—is animated by the presence of divine names. Seen in this light, we may say that God incarnates throughout creation and in the various forms through which we relate to God. God's names take on the shape, the reality, and the substance that is creation. Thus, incarnational language might suitably apply to God's creative activity. Does this insight have any relevance to the Jewish-Christian conversation? I think it does.

Let us begin with the history of the idea. The notion of the incarnation of Christ as the logos comes to Christianity from Philo.[34] The speculations concerning the logos were applied by the early Christian community to the person of Jesus. However, the original context in which the logos incarnates is the world. Has the incarnation of the logos in Christ completely displaced all other forms of logoic incarnation? It seems to me that at least one Christian theologian does not think so. David Burrell, in an article that originally was part of the Jewish-Christian symposium on the incarnation, wrote of the importance of recognizing the role of creation within the context of Christian theology in general and incarnational theology in particular.[35]

If I understand Burrell's contribution to the discussion of incarnation, he called for a widening of the horizons from the person of Christ to creation in its entirety, as it stands in relation to Christ. Burrell did not even hesitate to view favorably certain recent panentheistic theologies.[36] While this might necessitate much cajoling on both sides, panentheism may not be such a bad place to meet. That all of creation takes place within God, and therefore bears within it a divine dimension, and that the incarnation might be viewed as both the endowment of creation with divine presence and the actualization of this power—might be a formulation that both Jews and Christians are able to live with. Perhaps the greatest Jewish thinker of the twentieth century, the late Rabbi Kook, has been rightly called a panentheist. A panentheistic position allows us to break down some of the boundaries we pose between God and creation, to think of God in a more dynamic and process-oriented sense, and, therefore, to view the incarnation, to a certain extent, as a less radical event.

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[34]See H. Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, pp. 364ff.

[35]See also David S. Yeago, "Jesus of Nazareth and Cosmic Redemption: The Relevance of St. Maximus the Confessor," *Modern Theology* 12 (April, 1996): 182. Yeago, presenting the thought of Maximus the Confessor, wrote of the occurrence of the incarnation in various dimensions: textual, cosmic, and personal. These ideas are fruitful for extending the interreligious exploration of the meaning of the incarnation beyond the conventional usage.

[36]David B. Burrell, "Incarnation and Creation: The Hidden Dimension," *Modern Theology* 12 (April, 1996): 214.

B. The *Zaddik*

The realization of God's presence in everything might allow us to apply incarnational language to a wide range of phenomena. Narrowing the scope, somewhat, is the second proposal I would like to offer, based upon the doctrine of the *Zaddik*, as articulated in Hasidic literature. Before presenting the relevant sources I should state that what follows is not a common Jewish perspective. The point in bringing what follows is not to establish precedents or to define what is normative for Jewish belief. Rather, I am attempting to bridge a gap of understanding by drawing attention to the uses of religious language and to specific religious understandings, which might allow for a common conversation and for better understanding to emerge. Drawing attention to what follows does not mean this is normative Jewish belief. It does indicate, however, that Jewish theology has the capacity to go beyond how it is conventionally perceived.

According to the doctrine of the *Zaddik*, the spiritually perfected master can be spoken of as one with God. This unity can be variously perceived as a form of mystical union, a union of being, a representation, etc. Often, Hasidic sources slide from one manner of articulation to another, obviously ignoring differences that, to the theologian, may be of the greatest significance.[37] One of the ways in which the relationship between the *Zaddik* and God is spoken of can rightly be described as incarnational. I would like to demonstrate this from a talk delivered by the late Menahem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch, at his crowning ceremony. The relevant text is as follows:

> Just as Israel and the Torah and God are all one, meaning that not only do Israel attach themselves to the Torah and the Torah to God, but [they are] "one" literally, so it is with the attachment of the Hasidim (disciples) to the master, which is not like two things that are joined, but rather they become "all one" literally. And the Master is not an "intervening intermediary" but rather a "connecting intermediary," and therefore for a disciple He, the Master and God—everything is one.
>
> I have not seen anyone who says so explicitly in an explication of Hasidic teaching but this is a feeling, and therefore whoever chooses to feel this way —let him feel. And whoever does not—I have no desire to argue with him, let him have his own lot.
>
> So therefore there is no room to query the position of an intermediary, since this is *His substance and essence itself as He placed Himself in a body.* (my emphasis)
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> And this is analogous to the Zohar that says: Who is the face of the Lord God—this is Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, or as we find that when carrying out a

[37] Very telling in this context is the collection by Avraham Baruch Pevzner, titled *Al Hazadikim*, 2nd ed. (Kefar Habad: House of the Union of Habad Hasidim, 1992). The author brings a treasure of Hasidic sayings that exhibit different theological nuances, as though they were all delivering an identical message. Appendix II, "The Parameters of *Avodah Zarak*," in Berger, *The Rebbe*, pp. 162-171, confronts many of Pevzner's arguments.

> task even an angel is called by God's name, or as Moses says: I will provide pasture in your fields (Deut. 11:14).[38]

According to this text a Rebbe is divinity, in essence and substance, located in bodily form. This is certainly incarnational language. That this language might be viewed as exceptional within Jewish circles is evident from the storm that greeted the publicizing of this statement, nearly half a century after the words were first articulated. Several years ago Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the leading rabbinic figure among Sephardi Jews, launched an attack on the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, accusing him of *Avoda Zara*—literally, foreign worship, a rough equivalent of idolatry, but more precisely connoting errors in proper worship by addressing them to wrong beings or to mistaken perceptions of the divinity. In response, a disciple of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's compiled a collection of sayings from Hasidic sources, in an attempt to justify his master. The collection titled *Al Hazadikim* contains an extensive list of sources that are relevant for assessing the possibility of an incarnational understanding of the *zaddik*. Two further sources are found in a much learned and very popular book by Hasidic master Isaac Levi of Berditchev, *Kedushat Levi*. Both texts are cited in *Al Hazadikim*, and the manner in which they are reconciled[39] is highly significant for the understanding of the limits of incarnational language within a Jewish text. The first text reads as follows:

> The sages said: Wherefrom do we learn that God called Jacob *El* (God), because it says and he called him God, and who called him? The God of Israel. The matter should be explicated, that one should not say, God forbid, that the fact that Jacob was called God is so that we should worship him, we must not say so.[40]

We might arrive here at a clear demarcation point between legitimate and illegitimate incarnational language. The boundary is worship. One may be allowed to entertain incarnational language, as the ancient sources relating to Jacob already did, but this language must not slip into worship.[41] If we followed this teaching only, we might uncover one important distinguishing feature between Judaism and Christianity—the worship of the incarnate being. Indeed, I think this criterion is, on the whole, valid and in the final analysis does constitute a significant drawing line that distinguishes the two traditions from one another. However, in an unusual move, which is primarily influenced by exegetical considerations, the *Kedushat Levi* is willing to cross even this line, in another exegetical context:

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[38]Reproduced in Pevzner, *Al Hazadikim*, pp. xiii-xv (my translation).

[39]Pevzner, *Al Hazadikim*, p. 7.

[40]*Kedushat Levi*, parashat Vayishlach.

[41]Larry W. Hurtado, in *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), suggested, concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, that Christianity crossed the lines acceptable within Judaism when worship was directed to presences other than God. Thus, worship might be a legitimate distinguishing factor between similar theological structures. What distinguishes permissible from nonpermissible incarnational theology are the practical consequences for worship.

> We found in the Torah that one bowed down to a *Zaddik*, like Ovadiah who bowed down to Elijah. Because the *Zaddikim* have God's Torah, and we found that God called Jacob God, since he fulfilled the Torah in its entirety, he was in the aspect of God, similarly all the *Zaddikim* because of the commandment of the Torah have this aspect, and one is allowed to bow down to them.[42]

This is an unusual statement, which is intended more than anything to account for biblical data. It does not generate any particular behavior in the circle of R. Levi Yitshak's disciples. It remains a rather isolated instance.[43] Furthermore, in this passage there is no explicit incarnational language. Here the Torah is what confers divine status, and no direct incarnational language is employed. It is part of a larger network of divinizing language that typically lacks the theological precision that led to disputes, councils, and credos in the Christian tradition.

Let us return to the Lubavicher Rebbe's teaching, which is more expressly incarnational. In attempting to defend his master, the author of *Al Hazadikim* attempted to reconcile the two contradictory statements of the *Kedushat Levi*. His manner of reconciling them made the following distinction: One cannot bow to a master in and of oneself. One may only bow to a master because one is completely annihilated to God. The author then accounted for all the incarnational expressions of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on similar grounds. It is because Moses was annihilated to God's reality that he could speak in the first person, as though he were God. It is because the master Simeon bar Yohai had totally annihilated himself to God's presence that one could speak of him as the face of God.[44] We have, then, a clear theory for understanding how incarnation can be spoken of in this context.[45] Beyond the distinction between worship-oriented and nonworship-oriented incarnation, important differences emerge with regard to the ideonic context of incarnational language in this quote and in Christian thought.

The type of incarnation envisioned in the notion of the *Zaddik* is not inherently limited to one single being. It is a function of a particular spiritual achievement. Attaining a certain spiritual degree allows God to dwell within one and

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[42] *Kedushat Levi*, parashat Shoftim.

[43] Even here, instances of crossing the lines have been claimed within Jewish boundaries as well. Berger, in *The Rebbe*, focuses on the problematic theology of Lubavitch Hasidism, following the death of the late Menachem Mendel Schneerson. One of Berger's key points is the move from belief in a false messiah to belief in the late Rebbe's divinity. Unlike the above quotation from the *Kedushat Levi*, a worshipful posture toward the late master has been adopted by some followers as well. See especially pp. 81-94, as well as other passages indexed under "Schneerson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel: divinity." The comparison between Lubavitch Hasidism and Christianity is explicit at several points in Berger's discussion; see passages indexed under "Christianity,"

[44] The author supports this interpretation by other citations from the Lubavitcher tradition, thus making this reading of the incarnational passage very convincing. See Pevzner, *Al Hazadikim*, pp. 13-16.

[45] David Berger called my attention to the parallel between the human self-effacement that characterizes this understanding and the divine self-emptying as expressed in the New Testament notion of "*Kenosis*."

enables one to regard the spiritual master as divine. Such attainment is potentially open to all who attain this spiritual level. In this sense, one might suggest that incarnation functions here as a relational rather than an ontological category. As some of the texts brought by the author of *Al Hazadikim* suggest, the incarnational status of the *Zaddik* is grounded in wider notions: the image of God, the election of Israel, the power of the Torah. The incarnation is thus not a single, unique act of God. In fact, it is not—at least not at face value—an act of God at all. The Christian story of the incarnation tells a tale whose chief hero is God, who takes the initiative to incarnate. For many thinkers, it is precisely human helplessness that necessitates this divine intervention and initiative. In the case of the Rebbe, by contrast, it is the Rebbe who attains God-Humanhood through his own efforts. The direction and the motivating force are thus completely different.[46]

A further difference touches upon the nature of the respective incarnations. It would be reasonable to describe the type of incarnation related in the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe as a kind of clothing. Divine reality is clothed in human stuff. The human stuff does not cease to be human, nor is it fully divinized. We can speak of the Rebbe or *Zaddik* as divine, but this does not mean he is God. We have no guarantee of sinlessness or of inerrancy. Obviously, the close proximation to the divine would aid in this respect, but there is no inherent guarantee that sin or error would not apply. While disciples would naturally regard their master as infallible, I know of no theological basis in Lubavitch doctrine to support the claim that the Rebbe could not sin. This issue is subject to much nuancing and exploration on the Christian side. However, there is a large consensus that Christ could neither sin nor err.

More significantly, the notion of a body that clothes divinity assumes that the body is not divine.[47] On the Christian side, however, the assumption is that the body of Christ, too, is divine. Incarnation is thus not only divinely initiated and unique, but it also encompasses a fuller sense of the human person, who is said to be not only divine but truly God. If we return to the criterion that it is worship that makes the difference, the Christian position makes a claim that is very problematic from the Jewish perspective. That the logos has been enfleshed means that Christ's body is subject to religious worship. It is the emphasis on the incarnation as occurring in a body, itself divine, that leads to the belief in Christ's physical ascension to heaven, where he remains incarnate, in his divine body.[48] While the common Christian thinks of worshiping the person of Christ,

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[46]I would claim this is still incarnation, not a kind of apotheosis, because the human nature does not cease. On apotheosis in Jewish sources, see Moshe Idel, "*Metatron-hearot al hitpathut hamitos bayahadut*," in Havivah Pedayah, ed., *Myth in Judaism*, Eshel Beer-Sheva Occasional Publications in Jewish Studies 4 (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1996), pp. 29-44. It is also interesting to note that French-speaking Lubavitch hasidim have referred to the late Rebbe's demise explicitly as "*apothéose*" (see Berger, *The Rebbe*, p. 92).

[47]The sources brought in Berger, *The Rebbe*, pp. 97-101, suggest only that the Rebbe is not limited or encumbered by his body, not that his body is divine.

[48]"[T]he union of the human and divine natures in Christ, once effected, was never dissolved and will never be dissolved. The hypostatic union will endure forever" (E. A. Weis, "Incarnation,"

rather than his flesh, the theological consequences of the doctrine of the incarnation apply to worship as much as to theology. Let me quote an ancient Christian voice:

> We confess . . . a single worship of the Logos and of the flesh which he assumed. And we anathematize those who render diverse acts of worship, one divine and one human, and who worship the man born of Mary as being different from him who is "God from God."
>
> [T]o him we properly bring our worship, and his flesh is not excluded from the worship.
>
> For whoever does not worship this flesh, does not worship him.[49]

Such a statement is perhaps the hardest to reconcile from the Jewish perspective. The issue is not one of truth or philosophical possibility. The preceding discussion indicated that, under certain circumstances, various theoretical formulations may emerge that defy common perceptions of Judaism. The issue seems to be one of a basic posturing of Judaism with regard to certain religious claims, such that might entail the worship of a human being. It seems fair to generalize that Judaism has consistently fought a battle against the worship of humans as divine. It is worship that is the key issue here, rather than the recognition that human beings have divine potential, are created in the image of God, are united with God, and might even be presented as God incarnate. Thus, the implications of the claim of Christianity concerning the total being of Jesus' being divine cross the line between theology and worship, thus posing the question whether Judaism can come to terms with such an understanding.[50]

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in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, p. 414). On the philosophical status of the belief in the ascension and its relation to belief in the incarnation, see Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 235ff. Note that the ascension might support some of the understandings of the incarnation that do not emphasize atonement as the ultimate justification for the incarnation. See Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 217ff.

[49]Appolinaris of Laodicea, quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, p. 239. The first passage is from *Fides secundum partem* [Detailed Confession of Faith] 28 (H. Lietzmann, ed., *Appolinaris von Laodicea und seine Schule* [Tübingen, 1904] p. 177); the second, from *Fragments* 6 (Lietzmann, p. 205); the third, from *De fide et incarnatione* [On Faith and the Incarnation] 6 (Lietzmann, p. 197).

[50]All this may or may not be relevant to the halakhic discussion of Christianity as idolatrous or, more correctly, to use the halakhic nomenclature, "*avoda zara*." The halakhic definition does not necessarily focus upon the issue of the incarnation, let alone its corporal aspects. In thinking of the possible implications of this corporal understanding of the incarnation to a halakhic view of Christianity, one wonders how many believers are actually aware of this implication of the doctrine of the incarnation; it is one that not many people subscribe to. Needless to say, many contemporary Christologies will have done away with the strong "fleshy" quality of these arguments. But, even within the pale of orthodox Christologies, most people are aware of Christ's person, not of his flesh, as the object of adoration. From another angle, one should keep in mind the great efforts Christian theology has made to affirm what it considers its understanding of the one God. I believe a contemporary Jewish assessment of Christianity, from the perspective of its halakhic definition in relation to *avoda zara*, must take into account the avowed position and the theological efforts of Christian theology—and not limit itself to the visible similarities with other phenomena, which Judaism opposed, that did not place an emphasis on their own accord with the belief in one God. In saying this, I address the subject from an angle that parallels the Christian concern with monotheism

VII. Incarnation and Mysticism—Common Ground?

Having pointed to the possibility of incarnational language applied in Jewish sources to spiritual masters, we should advance the discussion of the meaning of God-human talk. It may be insufficient to point to the existence of the idea of a God-human in both tradition. One might argue that the differences in the application of such an idea outweigh the similarities and that, therefore, even what seems to be incarnational within Judaism is not of a kind with incarnational language found in Christianity. While I consider the common uses to be highly significant, I think further thought should be given to our ability to speak in terms of a God-human. I would like to suggest that one way in which such talk might be meaningful is by reference to the field of mysticism. The statement of the Lubavitcher Rebbe was formulated within the matrix of mystically oriented thinking within Judaism. This poses the question whether mysticism offers us a language as well as a mode of being through which we can make better sense of the incarnation. Wolfhart Pannenberg has commented on the fact that the incarnation all too easily falls into the domain of the mythical: "[I]ncarnation . . . can . . . only constitute the conclusion of Christology. If it is put instead at the beginning, all Christological concepts . . . are given a mythological tone."[51] One way of making nonmythical sense of the incarnation is in terms of the mystical reality. I would like to pose, therefore, the question of whether there is a common mystical ground that might allow us both to understand better what is meant by the incarnation and to discover a greater commonality thereby.

In this context the thought of the Cappadocian Fathers comes readily to mind. Christ became human so that we might become divine. The incarnation, here understood as a process that creates a fundamental change within human nature, opens up the possibility for the human to undergo the process of *theosis*, becoming divine.[52] Having such a theoretical and experiential framework allows us to look at the idea of incarnation more seriously. If being a God-human is a possibility, then the thought of some great or primary God-human, who was sent from above, seems a less mythical idea. I shall not enter a detailed discussion of the possibility of divinization within the Jewish tradition. The idea is certainly present enough to break the stereotypes of what is possible within Judaism. If the incarnation is understood as a difference in degree, rather than in kind,[53] we might have a language whereby the two traditions can understand each other. That is, if the incarnation of Christ is not viewed as so singular as to be fundamentally different from all other instances of God-humanhood, but is, rather,

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and the avoidance of idolatry. However, as Berger has reminded me, halakhic discussions might approach the matter from their own categories, thus making possible what might seem to the Christian to be an oxymoron, namely, monotheistic *avoda zara*.

[51]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, tr. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 279.

[52]See H. Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p. 427; Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, pp. 233ff.; idem, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 318.

[53]Cf. John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London; SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 392; Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, p. 11.

viewed as an extreme case of such accomplishment, then a bridge of understanding might be constructed between the two traditions.

In this context permit me a brief observation on mystical experience and mystical union.[54] The idea of the divinization of human beings presupposes some kind of notion of union of a mystical type.[55] It is common to present Judaism as lacking the idea of a mystical union. Recent work has indicated that within Judaism we also find mystical union, which is not necessarily a distinguishing mark that separates Christian and Jewish mysticism.[56] However, while the idea of God-humanhood opens a door to interesting future investigations, I am not certain that the idea of mystical union does the same. The reasons for this are twofold. First, on the Jewish side, mystical union does not result in a permanent transformation of self. It is limited in scope and time, as it is in many forms of Christian mysticism.[57] On the Christian side, as far as I can tell, mystics do not seem to attain permanent union, nor is such union portrayed in terms of the incarnation. Union is temporary and takes place in the spirit, not in the body. For this reason, the language of incarnation is not usually employed to describe the union with God. The notable exception might be Meister Eckhart. Eckhart's notion of the birth of the Son in the soul and its relation to the permanent achievement of the consciousness of the ground of being provides rich materials for further thinking on the incarnation, both by extending the scope of the incarnation from a one time event to a continual event and by grounding it in an experiential dimension. Such an experiential dimension might be related to experiences found within other religious traditions, thereby taking the incarnation out of the field of Christian dogma and making it a relevant descriptive category within an interreligious context.

VIII. Incarnation and Judaism—Fundamental Problems and Moral Queries

A. Theological Considerations

In the various attempts I have made to explore the possibility of a shared language around the incarnation, one difference seems to remain. The Christian can point to Jesus and, with all the power of this idea, say, "*Ecce Deus*." The Jew does not seem to cross that line. The constellations of thought I have explored, as well as the thoughts of previous scholars, do not permit one to point

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[54]It is interesting to note that the same parables that mystics use to describe their union with God are used by the church Fathers in their attempts to portray the incarnation. See H. Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p. 445.

[55]Idel has noted that, without such a notion of union in kind, apotheosis is portrayed as a growth in dimension but not as a full divinization. See Idel, "*Metatron-hearot.*" pp. 32ff.

[56]See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

[57]See the various comments in Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.; London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1989), pp. 159, 190, 192.

to a human being and say that the person is God. One might say that the person is divine, but one would never say that the person is God. This, it seems to me, is a chasm over which it is hard to build a bridge. The problem is primarily theological, but it has serious moral consequences as well. From the theological perspective, Judaism's concern for serving God alone can be seen as the ultimate message of the Torah. The boundaries of God and humankind can be collapsed, and a person might be divinized. However, is there a threshold that Judaism(s) will not cross? The Chalcedonian understanding of the incarnation forces us, as Jews, to confront this question seriously.[58]

Let me move on to some of the moral issues presented by the uniquely Christian view of the incarnation. As is obvious from the structure of my presentation, I have allowed the Christian tradition, throughout our discussion, to pose questions to the Jewish tradition, and I have attempted to respond to the challenge by bringing out those elements found within the Jewish tradition that might allow for bridge-building. At this stage, I would like to move to the most difficult part of the presentation, in which I would like to pose certain questions to the Christian partner in conversation. What is difficult about these questions is precisely that they touch more upon the moral dimension of our religious being and beliefs than upon the philosophical and theological dimensions. I pose these questions not in the spirit of the grand debates of the Middle Ages but from the premise that we must all work together in thinking and working our way toward God, that our traditions are ever in need of growth and purification, and that the conversations we hold across the boundaries of religions are important for the internal growth of our traditions.

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[58]While preparing this presentation I gradually came to entertain the possibility that the incarnation poses more of a threat—or challenge—to the Jewish sensibilities than the Trinity, which is often portrayed as the core of the Jewish objection to Christian theology, and which is often regarded as *avoda zara*. Cf. also Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, p. 105. The Trinity poses a challenge with regard to understanding the intradivine life. Viewed apart from the incarnation, certain understandings of the Trinity could have been entertained by Jews and would have not seemed idolatrous. By contrast, the incarnation touches a deep nerve in the Jewish awareness, concerned with the preservation of boundaries between the human and God. That both traditions can speak of God-human might allow them to better understand each other. However, the types of claims made by orthodox God-human talk seem to go against a primary Jewish intuition concerning the divine. Nonetheless, certain fundamental differences should be pointed out between the incarnation and classic cases of the worship of humans. The known historical precedents for human worship relate to the worship of a living person, claiming incarnate status. This underlies imperial worship, which Judaism vehemently opposed. Moreover, in the ancient world the person claiming incarnate status was viewed as the incarnation of a particular deity. See Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, vol. 1, pp. 134ff. The case of the Christian incarnation is different not only in that it is not addressed to a contemporary living person but also in that it affirms the basic faith in the one God, who has become incarnate. Moreover, it is the adoption of a particular philosophical language, put to the service of the attempt to defend the notion of divine unity, that has ultimately produced the specific theological formulations of the great councils. The question thus poses itself: To what extent is this one more step in the application of language of union, divinization, and incarnation, and to what extent has a theological line been crossed? Unfortunately, previous generations could not think the issue through on theological grounds divorced from their historical situation. The uncovering of some Jewish incarnational statements indicates that the range of theological flexibility is in principle greater than historical circumstances indicate. Again, see the various comments in McGinn and Idel, *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith*, pp. 159, 190, 192.

The questions I pose are, to a certain extent, a continuation of the ongoing debate in Christian circles with regard to the incarnation. I shall not address the philosophical issue of meaning, which has characterized so much of Jewish-Christian debate and which occupies much of contemporary discussion. I am convinced that philosophers of religion are capable of making sense of what they chose to make sense of.[59] I do not believe the issue is ultimately a philosophical one,[60] just as I do not believe that the essence of religion should be conceived in terms of truth. Therefore, the issues I shall present do not concern the truth of the incarnation but, rather, how it works, what it provides, and what its effects are. I pose the following questions from within the matrix of Jewish-Christian relations that are ever evolving, on the mend, and yet in need of constant thought and reconsideration.

B. The Incarnation within Jewish-Christian Relations

Casey, in his book *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, portrayed the development of early Christology, suggesting that the idea of the incarnation took place on gentile soil and within a gentile Christian community. According to Casey, this idea could not have taken place within a Jewish community, because it was opposed to the self-identity of the Jewish community.[61] Aware of the consequences of his presentation beyond their significance for the evolution of early Christology, Casey touched upon the inherent anti-Jewishness of the doctrine.[62] Early Jewish Christology could not have crossed the line of proclaiming that Jesus was God incarnate. That claim, especially as it was later elaborated by the church Fathers, said Casey, betrays a fundamentally anti-Jewish bias. It casts Jesus in a mold that he did not recognize, and could not have thought himself to be. In fact, it ultimately denies the Judaism of Jesus. By casting Jesus in incarnational terms, the very Jewishness of Jesus is denied. While I have attempted to provide bridges for incarnational language, drawn from later periods of Jewish thought, I do not think these models of thought were available to Jesus or to his early followers. Therefore, the question must be faced of whether the incarnation is fundamentally un-Jewish and anti-Jewish, by force of rejecting Jewish identity.

This question can be amplified. Hick[63] has pointed out that the incarnation is responsible for various moral vices. Obviously, the moral vices are a function of the people, not necessarily of the doctrine. However, we cannot ignore completely the negative role that certain doctrines have played in history. The incarnation

[59]See C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 118ff.

[60]Cf. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, p. 134; and the *laissez faire* attitude expressed even within intra-Jewish discussion in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's discourse. Whether or not one believes something is a matter of a choice of faith, not a reasoned philosophical argument.

[61]The basic scheme presented by Casey is shared by Dunn (see his *Christology in the Making*), even though the latter did not subscribe to the social aspect of Casey's description.

[62]Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, pp. 163ff.

[63]Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, pp. 80-88.

means that Jesus was God. This recognition was the basis for the charges of deicide leveled at Jews throughout the centuries. Thus, the incarnation is not only contrary to Judaism theologically but has also led to hostility toward the Jews—a concrete historical and moral consequence that has been devastating to the relations of Jews and Christians. One would not be going too far in saying that, had the doctrine of the incarnation not been articulated, much suffering could have been prevented, and the immense chasm that has come to separate Judaism from Christianity might not have been as wide.

One of the issues that has been raised by the accumulative modern study of the New Testament, which plays a significant role within the Jewish-Christian dialogue, is the place of Jesus as a Jewish teacher and his location within late-second-temple Judaism. It seems fitting for Jews to reflect upon Jesus as one of their kind, a teacher who had something to say within their own religious tradition. In this context, the claim that Jesus was God incarnate hampers Jews from being able to view Jesus in his concrete historical reality as a Jew—and from being able to own him as part of their own cultural, and even religious, heritage. For Jews to take the historical Jesus seriously, he must be thought of as a human being, perhaps one among many rabbis,[64] rather than as God. The incarnation can thus work both against Jesus' own self-understanding and against the Jewish people's understanding and recognition of his significance.

Two further questions need to be posed by Judaism to Christian incarnational theology. Both questions have elicited various replies within Christianity; therefore, they cannot be presented as the only Christian position. However, common perception of both issues is such that much room is left to pose these questions. Both questions touch upon the possibility of displacement and the loss of Jewish identity and legitimacy. The first question concerns the reason and the need for the incarnation. It is conceivable that God might incarnate to help us along in our evolution and to help instruct humans. Alternatively, the incarnation of God might be viewed as an expression of God's glory, made known to humans. In fact, the prologue to the Gospel of John, the first articulated theory of incarnation, seems to present just such an ideal: "So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory." However, through a mixture of Pauline theology and Johannine incarnational thought,[65] the incarnation had become associated with the atonement of sin. There was no way to atone for sin save by God's taking it upon Godself to relieve humanity of the burden of its sins, by sacrificing God's son.

Scholastics in the Middle Ages debated whether God could have redeemed us without the incarnation[66] and whether the incarnation would have taken place had there not been sin.[67] For the Franciscans, the answer was positive. For the

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[64]See James H. Charlesworth, "Hillel and Jesus: Why Comparisons Are Important," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Hillel and Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 3-30.

[65]I assume, following Dunn, that Paul had reached the verge of incarnation, without crossing it.

[66]See Swinburne, *The Christian God*, pp. 216-217.

[67]See Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, p. 205.

Dominicans, whose spokesperson was Thomas Aquinas, the reason for the incarnation was to save humanity from sin.[68] Is not this view of the incarnation also anti-Jewish? For Judaism, God has provided for our means of atonement. To say that nothing could work except for God's sacrifice of God's own son is to say that what was available did not work. In other words, in a deep sense Judaism was insufficient—and perhaps even invalid.

The final question I would like to pose is not particular to Judaism. It has been discussed by various writers, particularly in the context of the interreligious awareness of the past several decades. The question touches upon the uniqueness of Jesus' incarnation. Most Christians would claim that only Jesus was the incarnate son of God, and that there is no room for relating to other spiritual masters in incarnational terms.[69] Such a unique claim derives from how the incarnation is understood by Christians. A weaker understanding of the incarnation, such as we found in Jewish sources, does not entail making such an exclusive claim. The exclusive claim is a function of how the incarnation is understood and of much of Christendom's superior self-understanding. The two go hand-in-hand. As Hick put it, to say that Jesus was God incarnate is to say that Christianity is the only world religion founded by God, thus making it superior to all others.[70]

The dialogue that Christianity holds with other religions must raise the question of the uniqueness of the act of the incarnation. While this issue is not specific to Jewish-Christian relations, it certainly applies to them as well. Within the continuum of great Jewish figures, the presence of Jesus is viewed as radically discontinuous, by virtue of the incarnation. Once more, the incarnation is an obstacle to Jews' re-owning Jesus as a teacher of their own tradition, for it casts Jesus in a light that is not only foreign but also discontinuous and removed from his own Jewish roots. I should note that various writers[71] have stated, following Aquinas, that Christianity can support the notion of multiple incarnations. This difficulty is thus not insurmountable.

Let me conclude with a more positive thought on the relation of the incarnation to Jewish-Christian relations. Dunn[72] has made a very interesting application of the notion of the incarnation. If Christ was incarnated in a physical life, we must take that life seriously. That is the life in which God chose to incarnate, and that life was Jewish. Thus, the incarnation can function as a means for enhancing mutual understanding and respect. It is important to bear this positive direction in mind. It can certainly serve as a corrective to the negative application of the idea of the incarnation in Jewish-Christian relations.

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[68]On the different positions, see Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 220.

[69]To a large extent, this position stems from the understanding of the incarnation as a form of atonement. There is need for only one atoning act. If, however, the incarnation is understood along different lines, the idea of multiple incarnations is more readily understood. See ibid., pp. 220ff.

[70]Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, p. ix.

[71]Ibid., pp. 89-98; Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, p. 170.

[72]James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 186.

In conclusion, then, it seems to me that we all have our thinking to do. Christianity poses for Judaism the invitation to listen more deeply to its witness and to think in richer language about some of its own treasures. Judaism, in turn, poses to Christianity certain questions concerning its understanding of the incarnation. This is the way we can help each other to God, by illuminating each other's path and by posting the question marks that are like little lamps placed along the pitfalls on our joint road to God.

NEW ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Irfan A. Omar

The editors of *J.E.S.* are pleased to welcome a new Associate Editor to our masthead. Irfan Omar received his Ph.D. in religion from Temple University in 2001. He holds M.A.'s from both Temple University and Hartford (CT) Seminary, and a B.A. from St. Stephen's College of the University of Delhi. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Theology at Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, and an adjunct at St. Francis (WI) Seminary. He has been an adjunct faculty member at the College of New Jersey (1998-2002), Temple (2000-02), St. Joseph's University (2001-02), and Rutgers University (Camden) (2001-02). He served as Muslim Student Counselor in the Spiritual Development Program at Philadelphia University (1995-2000), as an intern in the Seminarians Interacting Program of the then-National Conference of Christians and Jews (1996-97), and as a research assistant to Prof. Mahmoud Ayoub in Temple's Department of Religion (1994-96). His specialties include the history of religions and Islamic studies.

Dr. Omar is competent in Urdu, Hindi, English, Arabic, and Persian. He received several teaching, tuition, and dissertation grants from Temple; an Adolf Theis Foundation grant from Tübingen University; a travel award from the Association of Asian Studies; and both a faculty development award and a summer faculty fellowship from Marquette. He is a member of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies, the Association for Asian Studies, the South Asian Muslim Studies Association (on its board as of 2002), and the American Academy of Religion. He is also a member of the governing board of Global Peace Services, U.S.A.; on the international board of consultants for the Global Ethics and Religion Forum; and a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

At Marquette or St. Francis he is teaching courses on introductory Islam and its faith and practice, on Christian-Muslim dialogue, and on "Theology, Violence, and Nonviolence." In addition to the above topics, he is interested in mysticism in the world religions, in Hindu-Muslim relations in India, and in Islam in both the Middle East and South Asia. He has presented several papers or contributed to panels at meetings of learned societies or interfaith conferences in the U.S., Macedonia, and Indonesia, as well as lecturing in the Philadelphia and Milwaukee areas. His reviews, encyclopedia entries, and articles have appeared in several scholarly publications, including *The Muslim World* (1993 and 2000), *Studies in Contemporary Islam* (2000 and forthcoming), and *J.E.S.* (1999). He is guest editor of a special issue of *Islam & Christian-Muslim Relations* (2004) in honor of Mahmoud Ayoub.