



# *Religious Polemics in Context*

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**The Triune and the Decaune God:  
Christianity and Kabbalah as Objects of  
Jewish Polemics with Special Reference to  
Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne's *Nfilhemet  
Mitzva***

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*Christianity and Kabbalah: Theological Parallels*

Christianity and Kabbalah both share a teaching of God that affirms God's unity while providing further insight into the being of God. This additional insight is to some degree at odds with the stated affirmation of divine unity. Much mental effort has been invested by centuries of Christian thought attempting to find the proper way of stating the Christian mystery of the triune God. Similar, if less extensive, energy has been invested by the Kabbalists in affirming the fundamental unity of the Godhead, as taught in Kabbalah—the knowledge of the Decaune God (if I may be permitted a neologism in the context of the present discussion). One may describe both religious systems as relating to divinity in terms of an intra-divine structure.<sup>1</sup> For the adherents of these religious systems, the respective intra-divine structures do not violate the essential unity of the Godhead.

The parallels between Christianity and Kabbalah extend beyond the basic similarity of speaking of the one God in terms of intra-divine structure. In the history of working out the meaning of the parallel theological approaches many similar positions are taken by Kabbalists and by Christian thinkers. In both camps we find discussions of the meaning of the ascribed structures in terms of contemporary philosophy, in particular in relation to theories of divine attributes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I owe the notion of intra-divine structure to Moshe Idel. My debt to him also includes help in articulating my argument. I also wish to thank Daniel Lasker for his helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken

Some similar metaphors crop up in discussions of the meaning of the respective systems.<sup>3</sup> Above all, the affinity between the religious systems is repeatedly pointed out by authors and thinkers of the Middle Ages.

Obviously, we should not expect to find either Christians or Kabbalists simply equating their respective religious systems, thereby legitimating the other's religious system. However, both on the Jewish side and on the Christian side, we encounter various instances, in which a common theological approach is sensed underlying Trinitarian theology and Kabbalistic Sefirotic speculation. One form that the sense of such similarity might take is the need to define one's own position in a way that would avoid confusion with the other's. Accordingly, the earliest Kabbalists take pains to formulate their theological positions in ways that would distinguish their religious system from Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the reverse is not the avoidance by Christian thinkers of possible confusion with Kabbalistic doctrine. On the contrary, we find an eagerness to embrace Kabbalistic doctrine, both as a means for Christian self-understanding, and maybe more importantly, as a means for presenting Christianity to Jews in a way that could be accepted by them.<sup>5</sup> Christian missionary zeal, coming from the perspective of strength and power enjoyed by Christianity, can thus embrace Kabbalistic teaching, recognizing its own face in the teaching of the other. Such recognition may not be completely unfounded. In an important study on Christian influences on the Zohar, Yehuda Liebes suggests that there are indeed significant religious borrowings from the Christian tradition

Books, 1941), 11 ff. For a discussion of the Trinity in terms of divine theory of attributes, in the context of Jewish-Christian polemics, see Daniel Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Age* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 51ff.

<sup>3</sup> Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 96ff points out that both *Sefer Yezira* upon which the Kabbalistic concept of the Sefirot is based, and Christian sources resort to the same metaphor the flame connected to a coal. For the tree as a metaphor for the Trinity, see Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 102. Compare Scholem, *Major Trends*, 214.

<sup>4</sup> See Mark Brian Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's Commentary on Sefer* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University; Yezira, 1994), 167.

<sup>5</sup> The earliest example is probably Raymond Llull. See Harvey Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). On the phenomenon of Christian Kabbala see Gershom Scholem, "Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der Christlichen Kabbala" in *Essays Presented to Leo Baeck* (London: East and West Library, 1954), 158-93; J. L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

in the Zohar.<sup>6</sup> These influences are, according to Liebes, fully conscious. The Zohar's author is aware of surrounding Christian thought, and integrates it, perhaps better: he judaizes it in the context of his own mystical worldview. One of the areas where Liebes finds Christian influence is the concept of the Trinity. Liebes suggests various ways (non-christological, of course) in which the Divine is understood in trinitarian terms. It seems that the integration of Trinitarian concepts is only possible due to some fundamental similarity of approach to the divine, as understood by the two religious systems. The phenomenon of Jewish converts to Christianity provides us with further evidence for the common religious ground perceived between the two systems by contemporaries. The celebrated case of Abner of Burgos is only one of the known examples of Kabbalistically motivated conversions to Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

The affinities between the triune and the decaune God are spelled out in several statements by authors from the 13th and 14th centuries. Moshe Idel has recently described an intra-Kabbalistic polemic, that took place in the 1280s, between two leading figures representing different Kabbalistic schools: R. Abraham Abulafia, representing prophetic Kabbalah, and R. Solomon ben Adret, representing Sefirotic Kabbalah.<sup>8</sup> Following the Rashba's attack on Abulafia, the latter composed an epistle he sent to a disciple, in which he speaks of the different types of Kabbala, and the course of study leading to the acquisition of wisdom and prophecy. In parts of the epistle the two types of Kabbalah are juxtaposed respectfully, while acknowledging the superiority of prophetic Kabbala.<sup>9</sup> Later in the epistle, however, the tone changes, and a full-fledged attack is carried out against Sefirotic Kabbala, if we will, a decadent form of Kabbalah. "I shall therefore inform you that the masters of Sefirotic Kabbalah thought to unify the [divine] name, and to escape Trinitarian faith, and they [divided] Him to ten, as the gentiles say He is the three and the three are one, so some of the masters of Kabbala believe and

<sup>6</sup> Y. Liebes, "Christian Influences in the Zohar" in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1982/83): 43-74 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> See Isaac Baer, "The Qabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos," *Tarbiz* 27 (1958): 278-89.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Idel, "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia: The History of a Neglected Kabbalistic Polemic," *Atara LeChayim: FS Haim Zalman Dimitrovsk* (ed. Daniel Boyarin et al.; Jerusalem, 2000), 235-51 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> See Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Razei Hayei Olam Haba* (Jerusalem, 1999), 22ff., summarized in Idel, "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia," 244.

say divinity is [made of ten Sefirot, and the ten are one. Here they multiplied Him to the limit of multiplicity, composed him to the limit of composition, and there is no multiplicity beyond ten.]<sup>10</sup>

The comparison between the Kabbalists and the Christians could not be more explicit. The Kabbalists are portrayed as actively and consciously attempting to avoid the pitfalls of Christian Trinitarianism. If, despite the polemical context, we can learn something of the intentions of the Kabbalists themselves from one Kabbalistic student, it is that the Kabbalists were aware of the closeness between their religious system and the Trinitarian understanding of God. Abulafia portrays the Sefirotic Kabbalists as consciously attempting to formulate their theology in a manner that would distinguish them from the Christians.<sup>11</sup> According to Abulafia there is no fundamental difference between the affirmation of the triune God and the affirmation of the decaune God. Both are mistaken. In fact, the number ten functions as the ultimate expression of multiplicity, thereby suggesting the Kabbalists are worse off than the Christians, because the number of aspects ascribed to God represents the ultimate in multiplicity.

How do we reconcile the more positive attitude to Sefirotic Kabbalists earlier in the epistle with the scathing criticism levelled here? The earlier reference to Sefirotic Kabbalists is not directly linked to the polemic and the attacks on Abulafia. The above quote appears immediately after Abulafia refers to an epistle sent by the Rashba, in which Abulafia is attacked. It is possible that the polemical context and Abulafia's need to defend himself bring out a more forceful expression than the more subdued and neutral description of different Kabbalistic schools evoked. In the heat of debate expression becomes more radical. In some way we are forced to diminish the statement's power within its polemical context. In that case, the Trinitarian analogy to Kabbalah may lurk in the background, surfacing under duress. Another way of reconciling the two statements would be by noting that Abulafia refers to "some of the masters of Kabbalah." This may be a reference to the entire group of Sefirotic Kabbalists, as opposed to prophetic Kabbalists, a distinction introduced earlier in the epistle.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, Abulafia may be suggesting that only some of the Sefirotic Kabbalists fall into this

<sup>10</sup> Translation based upon Idel's textual emendations, based upon manuscripts, cf Idel, "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia," 246.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah*, above n. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Abulafia, *Sefer Razei Hayei Olam Haba*, 21.

category. In that case, some may indeed maintain a proper understanding of the divine, while others, like the Christians, are not able to go beyond the division of the Godhead into ten Sefirot. They are unable truly to unify the divine name, and despite their affirmation of the unity of the decaune God, their faith leads them to multiplicity. Idel sees in this passage an attack on the Rashba.<sup>13</sup> It may be that Abulafia's attack is not on the entire Sefirotic Kabbalistic system, but upon its less successful proponents. Countering the Rashba's attack on him, Abulafia could be casting the Rashba as a poor Kabbalist, who is unable to attain the truth of the unity of God, and who is theologically worse than the Christians. Whether the attack is on the person or on the system, the analogy between Christians and the Kabbalists is powerful both because it is so explicit, and because it comes from within a system of thought that is fundamentally receptive to and supportive of the Kabbalah.

The analogy between Christianity and Kabbalah appears also outside internal Kabbalistic discourse. The 14th century Spanish halakhist, Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet, the Ribash, devotes one of his responsa to the question of Kabbalistic prayer intentions. These involve directing prayer to particular Sefirot. The rabbi is asked about this way of praying and responds by saying he prefers the simple prayer of a child, addressing God simply, rather than through the intricate prayer of the Kabbalists. In the context of his discussion, the Ribash reports how the Kabbalists are perceived by others. "Also in the prayer of eighteen benedictions, they have for each one [of the benedictions] an intention to a particular Sefirah. And all this is a matter that is very foreign in the eyes of someone who is not a Kabbalist, as they are. And they (i.e. the non-Kabbalists) think this is a dualistic faith. And I have already heard one of the philosophers speaking ill of the Kabbalists. And he said, 'The idolaters believe in the Trinity and the Kabbalists believe in the decad.'" <sup>14</sup>

If the Kabbalists sought to affirm the unity of the decaune God, their philosophical opponents could not be expected to share this affirmation. The analogy between Christians and Kabbalists is the outcome, again making the Kabbalists look worse than Christians.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Idel, "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia," 246.

<sup>14</sup> Ribash responsa, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah*, 165, suggests another case of philosophically based comparison of the Kabbalists and Christians. Sendor cites Abraham Maimonides' report of the burning of his father's works through the instigation of members of the Montpellier community, who enlisted the aid of Christians. In passing,

The Kabbalistic-Christian analogy becomes a Kabbalistic-Christian connection in the anti-Christian polemical work, *Kelimat Hagoyim*, by the 14th century Spanish polemicist Profiat Duran. At the beginning of the second chapter of the work, Duran reports a tradition he had heard in his youth from an Ashkenazi talmudic scholar. "I heard, in my youth, when I was at the study house of my teachers, from an Ashkenazi talmud scholar, and I also heard from the Kabbalists, that Jesus the Christian and his disciples were Kabbalists, but their Kabbalistic teaching was imperfect, and through the practical part of that wisdom he performed the strange deeds that break the natural order."<sup>16</sup>

Kabbala is here understood to be composed of two parts, practical and theoretical. The Ashkenazi tradition is an attempt to account for Jesus's miraculous deeds by owning Jesus as part of the tradition of practical Kabbalah. Jesus is at one and the same time owned as part of the tradition, and criticized for his imperfect teaching. The passage continues by spelling out that Jesus's Kabbalistic knowledge drew from the left side, the evil and impure side. Kabbalah provides a framework for understanding Jesus's miracles, and at the same time for casting him in a derogatory light.

Duran continues by extending Jesus's Kabbalistic associations from practical Kabbalah to theosophical Kabbalah, finding support for the Kabbalistic origins of Christianity in a comparison of Kabbalistic and Trinitarian thought. "And when I went over the stories of the misguided, as chance enabled, I saw in them what agreed to this idea."<sup>17</sup> Because in

Abraham Maimonides comments on the affinity in the belief of these two groups: "For their faith is not far from their faith." Sendor finds here an allusion to the similarity of the doctrine of the Sefirot and the Christian Trinity. I find it hard to accept Sendor's suggestion. It is unlikely that in the late 1230's, when Abraham Maimonides was writing, detailed knowledge of the Sefirotic system would have reached him. The epistle of Meir ben Simeon, that we shall discuss below, was written at the same time as Abraham Maimonides' epistle. It is unlikely that teachings that were just starting to come into the open in Gerona would instantaneously be known in Egypt. The likelier reading of the analogy between Christians and Jews in Abraham Maimonides' epistle is that it refers to an anthropomorphic understanding of God. Repeatedly in the epistle, Abraham Maimonides speaks of the Montpellier community's low understanding of God, and of its anthropomorphic views. Anthropomorphic views of Jews who imagine God as possessing form are similar to Christian views that portray divinity in form. See Abraham Maimonides' "Iggerot Kena'ot," *Kovets Teshuvot Harambam Velgrotav* (ed. A. Lichtenberg; Leipzig, 1859), 18.

<sup>16</sup> "Kelimat Hagoyim," in *The Polemical Writings of Profiat Dura* (ed. F. Talmage; Jerusalem, 1981 [Hebrew]), 11.

<sup>17</sup> I.e., the Kabbalistic origins of Christianity.

that wisdom fathers and sons are united.<sup>18</sup> They call the Tiferet<sup>19</sup> fathers, and the *Malkhut* children and grand-children, and also the holy spirit and the spirit of God. And there is also there the word of God, which is said concerning the Sefirot, particularly concerning the Tiferet, and the image of God is also there. And all this is in the stories of the misguided, for they called Jesus son of God, and John at the beginning of his gospel called him the Word of God, and Paul called him the image of God, in 2 Cor 4,4. And the error of the Trinity that they place in the divinity also is a consequence of their error in that wisdom (the Kabbalah). Because they presumed the Or *Kadmon*, Or *Zach* and Or *Mezuchzach*<sup>20</sup> and they distorted from these three, that are one thing according to the truth of the ten Sefirot. And the intention of the Kabbalists in this is the intention of the philosophers regarding attributes, which they (the philosophers) assume at the outset of their discussions, that is, that . . . these attributes are not essential attributes, God forbid. And those of this faith (Christians), the misleaders, think them essential and separate. And from what has been mentioned it seems that what the Ashkenazi said is correct."<sup>21</sup>

Duran extends the insight he received from the Ashkenazi talmud scholar to the theosophical and theological arena. In so doing, he not only moves from the practical to the theoretical, but also from the person of Jesus and his wonder-working ability to the teaching of Christianity and the New Testament. References in the New Testament to father, son, word and image are to be understood according to their Kabbalistic equivalents. The Trinity is nothing more than a corruption of a genuine Kabbalistic teaching. Because Duran is philosophically minded, he offers a philosophical reading of the Kabbalah, which is juxtaposed with an essentialist understanding of the Trinity. The Kabbalists themselves would not necessarily agree with his presentation of the Sefirot. Nor would Christian writers consider this distinction an appropriate divide between the Kabbalistic teaching and a Trinitarian view of God.

Christian writers resort to the Kabbalistic system in their attempt to appeal to the Jews to accept the teaching as valid. There may be an echo of a historical reality in the fictitious dialogue, found in *Shevet Yehuda*, by the 15th Century Spanish writer, Shlomo ibn Virga. Thomas, the

<sup>18</sup> An alternative reading: invented.

<sup>19</sup> One of the ten Sefirot, as is the *Malkhut*.

<sup>20</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974), 95.

<sup>21</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 11-13.

Christian sage, makes the following point regarding the Trinity: "The Trinity is not a belief in multiple gods, but a simple unity for those who understand it. And I saw three great scholars, of the scholars of Ashkenaz, and I learned from them from the books of the Kabbalah, and I saw that from there one can understand how the Trinity is unity."<sup>22</sup> That this dialogue is fictitious only strengthens the fact that common perception enabled drawing parallels between Christianity and Kabbalah. Various authors attempt to spell out in specific ways how the trinitarian understanding of the Godhead is to be found in the Kabbalah. Abner of Burgos, a Kabbalistic convert to Christianity, identifies the Trinity with the three Sefirot of *Chokhma*, *Binah* and *Daat*.<sup>23</sup> Moshe Idel has pointed out that underlying the Christian justification of the Trinity in *Nizahon Vetus*, a late 13th-early 14th Ashkenazi anti-Christian polemical work, is an authentic Kabbalistic tradition relating to the three Sefirot *Din*, *Rahamim* and *Hesed*.<sup>24</sup> It seems reasonable to conclude that some fundamental systemic similarities between Christianity and the Kabbalah have repeatedly invited and enabled comparison. The details of such comparison, the suggested direction of influence, and the purpose of the comparison in justifying one system or another, are, from the present perspective, secondary to the fact that fundamental similarities can be perceived in the two competing religious systems, affirming the unity of God through their respective intra-divine structures.

#### *Anti-Christian and Anti-Kabbalistic Polemic – The Question of Context*

Given the affinities, real or apparent, between the Kabbalistic and the Christian understanding of God, one would expect the two understandings would draw more or less parallel reactions. Jewish polemical literature against Christianity is voluminous. The Middle Ages saw the rise of an entire genre of literature, devoted to Jewish polemics against Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Given how extensive the Jewish-Christian debate was, it is striking to note how little anti-Kabbalistic polemics we possess.

<sup>22</sup> *Shevet Yehud* (ed. A. Schochat; Jerusalem, 1947), 37.

<sup>23</sup> Isaac Baer, "The Qabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos," 280.

<sup>24</sup> M. Idel, "Notes on Medieval Jewish-Christian Polemics," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1983/84): 690ff.

<sup>25</sup> A survey of this literature can be found in "Disputations and Polemics," *EnJud* 6:79ff.

Some, it may be granted, may have been lost.<sup>26</sup> However, there is clear disproportion between the attitude to Christianity and to Kabbalah in the context of polemics and disputations. As Idel has noted, the emergence of major Kabbalistic schools did not stir significant controversies in the Jewish milieu in which they arose.<sup>27</sup> In fact there is only a single document in the extant literature which can be properly called an anti-Kabbalistic polemic—Meir ben Simeon Hameili of Narbonne's *Milhemet Mitzva*, a 13th century attack on the Kabbalah.<sup>28</sup> I shall address this text in the final part of this paper.

How are we to account for this discrepancy? Moshe Idel posed the question in a related way by juxtaposing the scarcity of attacks on the Kabbalah with the strong reaction that the appearance of Maimonides' works occasioned. Idel suggests two factors that protected emerging Kabbalah from the fate of the Maimonidean works.<sup>29</sup> The first is that unlike Maimonidean philosophy, Kabbalah was studied within families and limited groups, making no attempt to disseminate its tenets to

<sup>26</sup> See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah*, 2. The point is also made by Yossi Dan in "Polemics and Polemical Literature," *EnJud* 13:793. Serious criticism of the Kabbalah appears only in the renaissance in Italy, in a different geographical and cultural context. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 2-5, and see below.

<sup>28</sup> Idel's presentation of this text as not longer than a page is imprecise. Hameili's text consists of an epistle, that had been composed prior to the composition of the work in which it is embedded, and of additions made to it. The entire discussion devoted to or relevant to the polemic with the Kabbalah stretches in the densely written, double folio manuscript from p. 228 at least to p. 235. Depending on how the continuation of the discussion is understood, the following pages may also be related to the same discussion. Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (n.p.: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), seems to have a very different evaluation of the same data. After presenting Meir ben Simeon's epistle, in the context of Kabbalistic epistles relating to the same issue, Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 403, claims that from the beginning the appearance of the Kabbalah provoked objections and criticism. This opposition, claims Scholem, was not uniformly styled, even when Kabbalah reached the peak of its historical influence. Given that only one text is extant that mounts a concentrated attack on the Kabbalah (as opposed to disparaging remarks, such as found in the responsum of the Ribash), Idel's portrayal of this text as the exception rather than as the rule seems more appropriate. One should add that Scholem did cite one further instance of opposition to rising Kabbalah, in the form of a short sentence by Jacob Anatoli, regarding the use of names as Merkabah-teaching (398). Scholem himself agrees the reference may refer to magical practices, rather than to Kabbalistic speculations. In any event, while such a passing remark may show disapproval, it is far from a sustained and argued polemic.

<sup>29</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah*, 251ff.

larger audiences. The gradual surfacing of the mystical lore facilitated its broader recognition, when it came to the public domain. Moreover, the work of Maimonides was the achievement of a single individual. Kabbalah, on the other hand, enjoyed the support of a coalition of strong personalities, who formed a major segment of the intellectual leadership of the areas in which it first appeared. This line of reasoning draws on considerations that are external to the subject matter. For various practical reasons it was harder to attack the Kabbalists than the Maimonideans. They were, at least initially, less public, and throughout more powerful.

Scholem, too, resorts to a similar line of reasoning. Speaking of Meir ben Simeon's objections to the Kabbalah, Scholem writes: "The lasting influence of personalities like Nahmanides, whose authority was so great in the eyes of the public that it could silence objections of the kind documented here, must be appreciated all the more."<sup>30</sup> Scholem's formulation takes us a step beyond Idel's first factor. It is not simply that the battle against certain figures would have been difficult. More significantly, Kabbalah had authority, by association with the religious leaders of the time. Classical rabbinic authority thus helped to validate Kabbalistic teaching.<sup>31</sup>

Idel is aware that his first factor is external to the subject matter. He offers a second, and more important, consideration that is internal to it. The Kabbalah has a deep affinity with certain rabbinic patterns of thought. While the rationalist Maimonidean reinterpretation of tradition was sensed as a break with tradition, Kabbalah was perceived as having resonances with the talmudic-midrashic tradition.

Idel's second suggestion can serve as a gateway to some reflections on the context of polemics. Clearly, Maimonides made a convincing appeal to classical sources, which he reinterpreted. Similarly, the history of Jewish-Christian polemics provides countless examples of ingenious reinterpretations of Jewish sources, in the light of Christian teaching. The argument in the Jewish-Christian polemic may look as if it stands or falls on the correctness or incorrectness of a proof-text, on whether a particular claim concerning a particular text stands or falls. However, it is clear that the rejection of a Christian interpretation of a verse, or for

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 401.

<sup>31</sup> The obvious objection to Scholem's formulation would be to ask why Maimonides did not enjoy such authority. Idel's awareness of this question seems to be what led him in the direction in which he formulated his response.

that matter a Maimonidean interpretation in the context of that polemic, is not determined purely, and perhaps not at all, by the hermeneutical appeal of a particular reading. The attitude and the position taken in a polemic have been determined prior to entering the polemical situation. The actual arguments of the polemic provide only the specific claims in support of a position that was formulated outside the formal framework of the debate. In other words, the context of the polemic precedes and determines its content. It is the context that makes the polemic into a polemic, rather than a legitimate exchange of opinion between two related parties.

Let me illustrate this claim by pointing to two different religious movements current in late second temple times. Within rabbinic Judaism we find reference to two houses, the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai. Outside rabbinic Judaism we know of the different sects described by Josephus. We now possess the library of the Qumran community, most likely affiliated with one of those sects. Why is it that the division between the houses of Hillel and Shammai is considered to be of a different quality than the division between the rabbis and the Qumran covenanters? One could point to differences in ritual and practice that are unbridgeable, and which would then prevent recognizing the two groups as part of the same world. The difference between a solar-based calendar, known from Qumran, and a lunar-based calendar, as practiced by the rabbis, may be one such unbridgeable difference.<sup>32</sup> However, when historically examined, some of the differences between the houses of Hillel and Shammai could also have created a significant communal split.<sup>33</sup> It seems that more is at stake in the process of establishing the identity of a religious group and its relation to neighbouring groups than adding up points of agreement and disagreement.<sup>34</sup> Self-understanding seems to play a crucial role. The self-understanding of rabbinical society is, that certain controversies can be tolerated within it. By contrast, other social-religious groups are sensed to be different. Their otherness may find expression in deed and in

<sup>32</sup> See Albert Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 78.

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the historical reality concerning the relations between the two houses seems more complex than some of the idyllic rabbinic descriptions. See Israel Ben Shalom, *The School of Shammai and the Zealots' Struggle against Rome* (Jerusalem, 1993 [Hebrew]), especially ch. 6.

<sup>34</sup> See Albert Baumgarten, "Ancient Jewish Sectarianism," *Judaism* 47 (1998): 387-403.



thought. However, beyond the action and belief, an element of self-understanding, and the related recognition of the otherness of the other, induce the establishment of socio-religious boundaries. Such recognition seems to be intuitive, and therefore cannot always be reduced to its formative components. The intuitive sense by means of which the boundaries of insider and outsider are established creates the context within which the polemical moment takes place. The recognition of Bet Shammai alongside Bet Hillel as two components of a larger unified religious system is ultimately both intuitive and a matter of choice. Intuition leads to the recognition that both houses are part of a greater whole. This context determines how their discussions are viewed. Their discussions are a rabbinic debate, rather than a polemic. When intuition leads to regarding the other as part of a different world, the context for polemic is born.

The distinctions offered by Idel between the reception of the Kabbalah and that of the Maimonidean works are relevant to the question we posed regarding the discrepancy between the prevalence of anti-Christian polemic and the lack of anti-Kabbalistic polemic. Here, even more clearly than in the case of the works of Maimonides, it is clear that polemics are a function of context, overriding any considerations of the veracity and falseness of the actual claims made in the framework of the polemic. No matter what similarities one may perceive or present between Kabbalistic and Christian doctrine, such similarities and translations are all, from the perspective of tradition and its polemicists worthless. Raymond Lull failed in his attempt to convert Jews to Christianity through a proper translation of the Trinity into Kabbalistic terms.<sup>35</sup> This failure is not the result of poor translating. It is unavoidable. The chasm between Judaism and Christianity is wider than any bridge constructed through such translation could span. If the two religious systems merely disagreed on this or that detail of theology, Judaism's relationship to Christianity might be like that of Bet Shammai to Bet Hillel. However, the multiple disagreements in matters of detail betray a far more significant factor that sets the two religions apart. This factor is the self-understanding of the two religions as distinct from one another, and to a large extent in competition with one another.

That we find no anti-Kabbalistic polemics is best explained in relation to the identity-forming factors here discussed. By virtue of their rabbinic

<sup>35</sup> See Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, esp. 284ff.

authority, through the deep resonances with older traditions, and above all by virtue of their own self-understanding and self-definition, the Kabbalists are not considered as distinct and separate from the rest of rabbinic society. They are not an "other" and their social-religious identity is not distinct enough to provide a context within which polemic can take place. The Jewish-Christian divide, by contrast, provides a context for polemics. What is at stake in any Jewish-Christian polemic is not just specific issues. These are fed by the sense of otherness and the sense of distinct identity that characterizes the two groups. The polemic is first and foremost motivated by its context. While the content is what occupies the attention of the polemicists, their engagement in the act of polemic is a function of context. Due to this context no, or very little agreement, is possible.

In arguing that Jewish-Christian polemics are a function of context, more than one dimension of context should be considered. The obvious context is that of the difference between the religious systems themselves. However, the actual context in which such polemics took place should not be overlooked. The Jewish polemics against Christianity cannot be divorced from Christian attempts at evangelizing Jews and the forced public debates between Christians and Jews, designed to serve the Christian missionary impulse.<sup>36</sup> Had these debates not been forced on the Jews, and had Jews not needed to defend themselves against the charges and the threat of Christianity, most of the polemical anti-Christian literature would never have been written. Anti-Christian polemical literature is thus born not simply out of a struggle of ideas or the interpretation of texts. It is born of a particular historical context. This context dictates the very existence of the polemic, and in turn dictates the boundaries of the polemic, and the possibilities for true understanding

<sup>36</sup> See Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). The present argument is, of course, limited to the development of the extensive body of anti-Christian polemic that developed in Christian countries in the context of Christian efforts to convert Jews. Interestingly, the earliest Jewish polemics against Christianity emerge in a Muslim context. See Daniel J. Lasker and Sarah Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute of Jewish Communities in the East, 1996), 1:13ff. As Hava Lazarus Yafeh has shown, in reaction to earlier work by Lasker, the Jewish anti-Christian polemic, articulated in Muslim countries is of a kind, and is an extension of Muslim polemics against Christianity. Polemic is contextual, therefore, not in the historical sense typical of Christian countries, but in relation to the wider debate between the three religions, which is characteristic of Muslim countries. See H. Lazarus-Yafeh, "More on the Judeo-Christian Polemic and its Muslim Sources," *Pe'amim* 61 (1994): 49-56 (Hebrew).



that it contains. Little real understanding between the polemicizing parties is possible, as the nature of the argument is so heavily determined by its historical context.

There is, perhaps, a third sense of context. Having touched upon the social-religious sense of group identity as one element of context, and upon the historical context of missionary efforts as a second, I would like to raise the possibility that there is also a third context, a theological context. Religious polemics are carried out between competing systems. The theology, or theoretical underpinnings, of the competing systems, tend to be complete systems of thought, the various components of which justify one another. Therefore, a Jewish polemic against Christianity will not simply reject one specific article of Christian faith, no matter how important. Jewish polemical works examine the range of Christian belief—the entire religious system—and tend to tackle its multiple components. Against this general tendency, it is interesting to consider the role of the individual argument in the context of the wider ideological or theological framework. As stated, the common tendency in anti-Christian polemical literature is to assume that the fuller systemic context determines the value of all parts of the idea system, and hence to reject all elements of Christian belief. In some cases, however, an individual argument of the opponent may be recognized as valid. In such a case, the systemic theological context will be appealed to, as grounds for relativizing the validity of the acknowledged component of faith. The following example will illustrate this dimension of context.

Christian authors invested enormous efforts in making the Trinity understandable and hence acceptable to Jewish thinkers. This was usually done by means of translation. The Trinity was explained through other terms, acceptable to Jews. Here the philosophical language, common to Christians and Jews, served the Christians as neutral ground. Several such philosophical strategies existed.<sup>37</sup> One of these is the identification of the three persons of the Trinity with the then current Aristotelian triad of intellect—subject of cognition and object of cognition. Most Jewish authors rejected the legitimation of Christian belief by appeal to this triad.<sup>38</sup> One surprising exception is Leon de Modena. He writes:<sup>39</sup> “[the

<sup>37</sup> These are presented in the fourth chapter of Daniel Lasker's *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*.

<sup>38</sup> See Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 77ff.

<sup>39</sup> Quotes and translations for Modena are taken from Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 81–82.

Christians] present the doctrine in the following manner. One cannot deny that God knows and intellectually cognized Himself and generates from this an intellectually cognized object which He loves. Now the knower is the Father, what is generated from His intellectual cognition is the Son, and His love for it is the Holy Spirit. None of these three things, His cognition, the result of His cognition, and His love, are accidental to God as they are to man, nor are they external to him. They are essential to the Godhead, and therefore He is one in His substance and His three attributes, which they call *personae*. This is a wondrous doctrine and not impossible.”<sup>40</sup>

Modena explicitly affirms the possibility of Jews sharing in such a belief: “We shall not deny that God knows and intellectually cognized Himself and that which is generated from His intellectual cognition is that which loves Him, and everything is substance and not accident.” Likewise the philosophers and the sages call Him thinker, thinking and thought. Their use of the terms Father, Son and Spirit makes absolutely no difference.

For Modena the Christian translation can be disregarded. If indeed there is a common philosophical basis that allows Jews and Christians to agree upon the nature of God they may do so, despite the fact that Christians express this in traditionally Christian terms.<sup>41</sup> Modena continues, “When, however, they come and say that these three attributes are distinct and external to Him, and go so far as to say that one of them can do or become something which the other ones will not do or become, e.g., their statement that the Son became incarnate, but not the Father or the Holy Spirit, then this is the difference which completely divides our opinion from theirs.”

One could, in all probability, find a formula that would enable Jews and Christians to agree on the nature of the Trinity. However,

<sup>40</sup> This, and the following, quotes are taken from Modena's *Magen VaHerev*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Following Liebes' discussion, we should note that the possibility of accepting trinitarian thinking is not limited to a common philosophical basis, and can occur on a Kabbalistic platform as well. Clearly the acceptance or rejection of a trinitarian understanding of the Godhead must be thought of independently of the acceptance and rejection of Christianity. The contextual identification of Christianity and a trinitarian understanding of God will inevitably lead to the rejection of a trinitarian understanding because of the association of the two. Outside the context of Christianity, trinitarian understandings may arise. The cause of acceptance or rejection of such an understanding is therefore more a matter of the context to which it is attached, than a judgment of the truth or falsehood of the belief itself.

belief in the Trinity cannot be divorced from the wider context of Christian belief. The Trinity is not significant only in and of itself but because it provides the basis for another key element in Christian belief, the incarnation. Jews and Christians cannot agree on the incarnation. The incarnation ultimately also points to the Christian error in the understanding of the Trinity. The wider context of the theological structure thus informs the treatment of the individual component. Even if some particulars of faith could be agreed upon by Jews and Christians, the system in its entirety, the fuller theological context, must be taken into account. This prevents Jews and Christians from sharing their faith in the same God.

*Milhemet Mitzva – Battling Kabbalah in the Context of Anti-Christian Polemics*

Meir ben Simeon Hameili of Narbonne's *Milhemet Mitzva* is one of the most important Jewish anti-Christian polemics of the Middle Ages.<sup>42</sup> Rabbi Meir held several significant public and private debates with Christian officials, including Narbonne's archbishop, who later became Pope Clement IV.<sup>43</sup> The topics covered in his debates span the entire range of Jewish-Christian concerns, though one unique focal point is the discussions involving the rights of Jewish money lenders. Unfortunately, the work has never been edited or published in its entirety.<sup>44</sup> Only a single manuscript of the work is available.<sup>45</sup> In order to appreciate the present argument, a brief survey of the contents of the work is necessary. Part 1 of the work reports several dialogues and discussions of Rabbi Meir. Part 2 recapitulates most of the arguments of part 1 in the form of questions, posed on behalf of Rabbi Meir to his Christian

<sup>42</sup> On the work, see S. Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations in Thirteenth-Century Narbonne: Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College London, 22 October 1964* (London: Lewis, 1969); Idem, "A Disputation on Moneylending between Jews and Gentiles" in Me'ir b. Simeon's *Milhemet Miswah* (Narbonne, 13th Cent.), *JJS* 10 (1960): 45–61; William Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue in Provence as Reflected in Milhemet Mizva of R. Meir ha-Meili* (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1974); Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, ch. 4.

<sup>43</sup> See Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations*, 25 n. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Parts of the work have been published. Herskowitz published in his Dissertation Part 1 and part of Part 4. Part 2 was published by M. Y. Blau in *Shitat HaKadmonim Al Masechet Nazir, Zevachim, Arachin Utemura* (New York, 1974) and part 5 was published by him in *Sefer Hameorot I* (New York, 1964), 33–47.

<sup>45</sup> Parma 2749, De Rossi 155.

interlocutor. Following an initial series of 100 questions, an additional 40 and then a further 20 questions are presented. Some of the issues that come up in the questions concern the condition of the Jewish people and their present history, the continued relevance of Israel's election and the continued relevance of the Torah. It is, therefore, not surprising to see Rabbi Meir take up issues of Israel's history and former miracles performed on Israel's behalf as the subject of the third part of the work. The fourth part of the work addresses some of the other theological issues that had become subjects of Jewish-Christian polemic. It then returns once again to a report of Rabbi Meir's disputations with the Archbishop. The next part of Part 4 is introduced by the words: "I shall write here the words of the epistle that I wrote some time ago to disprove the words of those who speak falsely of God."<sup>46</sup> Here Rabbi Meir cites a polemical document written against the Kabbalists. This is the document referred to above, the only significant opposition raised against the Kabbalah during the first generations of its appearance. This document has been discussed by Gershom Scholem, who, however, did not publish the document in its entirety.<sup>47</sup> What follows in the *Milhemet Mitzva* has been previously described as various issues relating to prayer. Hence, scholars dealing with the work have tended to limit their attention either to the explicit dialogues with Christians, or to the anti-Kabbalistic polemic recorded in the work. The latter part of Part 4<sup>48</sup> as well as Part 5 are considered irrelevant to the Jewish-Christian polemic.<sup>49</sup> This raises questions regarding the overall purpose of the work. Siegfried Stein poses the question of the relationship between the diverse contents of the work as follows: "What then is the common denominator of the extraordinary mixture of subject matter in Me'ir b. Simeon's *Milhemet Miswah*, here assembled at random? Like his Christian opponents, he was engaged in a battle on two fronts. Under the influence of rationalism . . . quite a number of Jews . . . had become indifferent to the observance of their ancestral traditions. Others were tempted by the hopes of economic

<sup>46</sup> Folio 229a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 240. The entire opening paragraph would seem to be an introduction that Rabbi Meir composed on the occasion of republishing the epistle, in the context of his later work *Milhemet Mitzva*. The passage concludes with the request: "May God agree with us for the good, and teach us a good teaching, Amen Amen Selah," thereby marking the conclusion of the introductory note.

<sup>47</sup> Herskowitz records the full text of the epistle.

<sup>48</sup> From page 235 onwards.

<sup>49</sup> Compare Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations*, 11.