An offprint from

JEWISH THEOLOGY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

Edited by

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

and

EUGENE KORN

This material is copyright-protected and may not be be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of the author of the article, the editor of the volume in which it was originally published, and the publisher of the volume. Any requests for permission to use this material in whole or in part should be addressed in the first instance to the Littman Library at <info@littman.co.uk>, and all such requests should include details of the precise use intended.

Oxford · Portland, Oregon
The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
2012

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

Chief Executive Officer: Ludo Craddock
Managing Editor: Connie Webber

PO Box 645, Oxford OX2 0UJ, UK
www.littman.co.uk

Published in the United States and Canada by
The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
c/o ISBS, 920 NE 58th Avenue, Suite 300
Portland, Oregon 97213-3786

© The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2012

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means, without the prior permission in writing of
The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging-in-publication data
Jewish theology and world religions / edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn.
p. cm. – (The Littman library of Jewish civilization)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Judaism–Relations. 2. Religions. 3. Theology. 4. Judaism—Doctrines.
I. Goshen-Gottstein, Alon. II. Korn, Eugene, 1947–
BM534.J49 2012 296.3'9–dc23 2011031222

ISBN 978–1–906764–09–8

Publishing co-ordinator: Janet Moth
Production: John Saunders
Design: Pete Russell, Faringdon, Oxon.
Copy-editing: Mark Newby
Index: Christine Headley
Typeset by John Saunders Design & Production, Eastbourne
Printed in Great Britain on acid-free paper by
T.J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall.

Towards a Jewish Theology of World Religions
Framing the Issues

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

INTRODUCTION

Theology of religions is an area of reflection that has grown in prominence in recent years. Social and political changes, dating from before the Second World War, have given new urgency to relations between faiths and their practitioners. The marked increase in interfaith activity makes reflection on the status of other religions a pressing concern. The great increase in such activity has led to the identification and blossoming of this area as a distinct sub-field of theology. Regardless of the religion from whose perspective such reflection is undertaken, any contemporary theology of religions draws from perspectives articulated throughout that religion's history. Yet the field of theology of religions offers perspectives on other religions that are appropriate to contemporary social realities often radically different from those prevailing in earlier periods. This does not automatically mean that a pluralistic perspective that recognizes the other's religion is taken or that a relativistic perspective of one's own religion need be adopted, but it does mean that the challenges of religious pluralism loom large on the theological horizon. Even if the theologian rejects a pluralistic position, he or she is forced to state a position in dialogue with pluralistic theologians. Theology of religions has grown in the shadow of religious pluralism and the increase in interfaith dialogue, and hence it provides the framework for thinking through one's views of other religions with an emphasis on the challenges of religious pluralism. These include the full or partial validation of other religions and a reframing of the unique position, role, and mission of one's own religion.

The discipline of theology of religions grew initially on Christian soil. More than any other thinkers, Christians of all denominations have engaged with the issues and developed the discipline. This is as true of the work of individual theologians as it is of church documents, among which the Second Vatican

Council's *Nostra aetate* takes pride of place. Jewish theologians and others have entered the discussion following the lead, and in many cases also the language and categories, of Christian scholars and thinkers.

There are several distinct factors that make a contemporary Jewish assessment of world religions urgent and timely, both in terms of the broader social currents that have had an influence upon the emergence of the field of theology of religions and in terms of Judaism's particular history, mission, and self-identity. Fundamental changes have occurred both in Jewish history and in Judaism's relations with other religions, including changes in the theology of other religions, advances in interreligious relations, and the new historical situation represented by the creation of the State of Israel. Each of these alone might have necessitated a re-examination of Jewish attitudes to other religions, but the creation of the State of Israel is particularly significant. Changes in power relations between religions and the task of articulating a spiritual vision for humanity related to the mission of the Jewish state could drive a sustained programme of theological reflection. Regrettably, however, little thought has been given to these issues from the Israeli perspective. Most Israeli and Jewish energies have been focused on ensuring Jewish survival and continuity. Jewish creative energies have been turned mainly inwards, and almost no serious thought has been devoted to the theological challenges to Judaism posed in our contemporary context.

Theology of religions as a discipline has a quest common to all religions: defining a given religion's views of other religions. However, each religion must undertake this task in a way that is suitable to its own history and theology, as well as other significant factors, such as law or precedent. A contemporary Jewish theology of religions must draw on previous articulations of Jewish views of other religions. Each period of Jewish thought has bequeathed distinct positions and resources to this enterprise. The work of the contemporary Jewish theologian thus involves drawing from previous periods, assessing earlier views, examining changing historical circumstances, and articulating a vision for the future. But perhaps the most important characteristic of the theology of religions is its attempt to grasp the issues in their entirety and offer an overview of a religion's views of other religions. New context and comprehensive vision single out a contemporary theology of religions from the cumulative perspectives of generations that provide the basis for the contemporary theologian's reflections. This is certainly true for a contemporary Jewish theology of religions.

In this chapter, I shall present an overview of the broad range of issues that must be re-examined in order to construct a contemporary Jewish theology of world religions.[1] I hope the presentation is sufficiently comprehensive to offer

[1] These ideas have been expressed in two earlier Hebrew articles. An overview of the issues, with an emphasis on how these relate to contemporary practices of interfaith dialogue, was offered in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: A Preliminary Mapping' (Heb.),

a map of the field and a plan for future work. Even if much of what follows is drawn from classical sources, as indeed any theology of religions must be, drawing the resources together, choosing among them, and framing the issues for the future are all done with an awareness of the contemporary context. The essay is my attempt to specify what is involved in articulating a contemporary Jewish theology of religions. In addition to mapping the field, I will also suggest specific positions within it that seem most appropriate to the needs of a contemporary Jewish theology of world religions.

JUDAISM AND WORLD RELIGIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF PARTICULARITY

Any religion's attempt to develop a theology of other religions must grow out of concepts particular to that religion. Consequently, each religion must tackle questions particular to the history of its view of other religions and its internal concerns. In the case of Judaism, we recognize two core questions, and addressing these two questions is the key to developing a contemporary Jewish theology of world religions. Both questions touch upon religious particularity, and their conjunction is crucial to recognizing the challenges facing a contemporary Jewish theology. Two interrelated conceptual foci underlie Jewish particularity: faith in revelation and faith in the election of the Jewish people. It is not simply the faith in one God that distinguishes Judaism from other world religions, for some of those others share that faith. Rather, differences arise with regard to how God reveals himself and which community receives his word and carries it through history to eschatological fulfilment.[2] Judaism's particular spiritual profile is derived from the faith that a particular revelation took place at Sinai, was given to a particular nation chosen for this task, and it is that nation that traverses history to offer testimony to the God who chose his people and gave them his Torah.

The theological challenge that any Jewish theology of world religions must meet is how to uphold faith in the Jewish particularity arising from these two core beliefs, with an openness that makes space for the spiritual and religious existence of others.[3] This is not simply a conceptual or theological challenge,

Akdamot, 18 (2007), 6–40. A focus on the issues from the perspective of religious pluralism was offered in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'Interreligious Pluralism: Challenges and Parameters Towards Articulating a Jewish Theology of World Religions' (Heb.), in S. Fischer and A. Seligman (eds.), *The Burden of Tolerance: Religious Traditions and the Challenge of Pluralism* [Ol hasolvanut: mesorot datiyot ve'etgar hapeluralizm] (Jerusalem, 2007), 330–54.

[2] See Martin Jaffee, 'One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 69 (2001), 753–75.

[3] Due to the centrality of chosenness and particularity to a Jewish theology of world religions, they have been the first subjects to be tackled as part of a theological research and education project supported by the Henry Luce Foundation under the auspices of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

but also a cognitive and psychological one. These two doctrines shape not only Jewish faith but also a Jewish mentality that is often characterized by withdrawal and separation. Social insularity is often accompanied by attitudinal insularity. Thus in many believing circles the opinion reigns that there is little of value to draw on and learn from others. The elect community, the carrier of the chosen Torah, can teach others, even if it may not be actively engaged in such activity. However, this community has nothing to receive from others. Such insularity is the psychological opposite to the attitudes of listening and openness that underlie true dialogue. Such dialogue provides to a significant extent the impetus for the development of a contemporary Jewish theology of other religions.[4]

There are historical precedents for understanding election in a way that does not preclude openness and receptivity to others. The Maimonidean understanding, according to which election does not mean superiority but commitment to a spiritual way of life involving the acceptance of a proper religious and spiritual understanding, remains a compelling understanding of election for many thinkers,[5] as do understandings of election in terms of mission and responsibility towards humanity. Such understandings could leave room for Israel's mission to be complemented by those of other collectives and religions. Of course, even stronger understandings that view election as creating or founded upon a unique metaphysical reality and a particular essence could also support meaningful relations with and openness to others. However, the psychological orientation born of such understandings tends to shy away from authentic contact with the religious Other.

Judaism is not only a sum of beliefs and religious practices. It is fundamentally related to Israel's particular story. This has consequences for how one conceives of Judaism's relations to other world religions. Judaism has always recognized a balance between the spiritual teaching that it offers and the fact that it is a way of life, intended for a particular people. That Judaism is a nation's way of living enabled Judaism to refrain from active attempts to convert others to its own faith. The fine balance between the national/ethnic and the 'religious' dimensions of Judaism is of great value in developing a contemporary theology of other religions. This balance is vital to pluralistic concerns. Identifying the narrative component of Judaism, which, unlike the conceptual, philosophical, and theological dimensions, is unique to the Jewish people, allows us to focus

rabbinical seminary, in which a series of curricula presenting a variety of traditional sources with an eye to their application in contemporary theological situations has been developed for use in seminary and other educational settings.

[4] The theological imperative draws from various factors, both historical and theological. Advances in interreligious dialogue constitute one important factor. Others are discussed in Goshen-Gottstein, 'Theology of Interreligious Dialogue' (Heb.), 13–15.

[5] See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany, NY, 1991).

upon the particularity of the Jewish narrative, without the necessary negation of other narratives. The story of God making a covenant with his people is the story of a particular nation. It need not be told at the expense of other stories. Thus, the very fact that Judaism is so closely associated with the identity of Israel as a people has great potential for its view of other religions. If other religions, like Christianity and Islam, must approach the challenges of a theology of other religions from a history of active competition, vying for the souls of humanity, Judaism approaches this challenge from a more modest starting point regarding its aspirations for the active implementation of its vision in the world.

The narrative perspective reveals another significant way in which we can open up to the Other and develop a pluralistic view of other religions. The insular world-view translates faith in election into a psychological stance, according to which Jews are better than others, without fully accounting for the chosen nation's story. Israel's story is not a success story; on the contrary, to a large extent, it is a story of failure. This recognition underlies Christian supersessionist claims, and these may account, in part, for the difficulties in internalizing failure and imperfection as part of our own self-understanding. Still, failure is also recognized on internal Jewish grounds. Israel's exile, the kabbalistic notion of the exile of the Divine Presence itself, the destruction of the Temple, and the loss of prophecy are all consequences of sin and failure. Any assessment of Judaism in relation to other religions assumes some spiritual assessment of Judaism and its own spiritual well-being and proper functioning. An honest assessment cannot disregard the gap between Judaism in its ideal form and present-day Judaism. While Jews have come to love this form, to offer themselves in service to God through it, and even to offer their lives for it, one cannot ignore the fact that in many ways this form is flawed in comparison with the spiritual ideals that Scripture articulates. Does the recognition of our own imperfection produce a humbler attitude? Does such an attitude open the door to different relations with other religions? Of course, one can claim that our spiritual ailments preclude genuine openness and necessitate insularity as a form of survival. Moreover, one may argue that whatever imperfection is inherent in present-day Judaism, openness to other religions is not the way to address it, as those religions do not point the way to perfection. These claims cannot be dismissed out of hand, but they are not the only possible response to the acknowledgement of imperfection, and we have at least one important precedent for openness to other religious traditions being justified precisely by appeal to the ailments of the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Abraham Maimonides, son of Moses Maimonides, provides this precedent. He consciously absorbed strong Sufi influences into his religious world-view and his own ritual practice. He justified this through the claim that the Sufis possess a teaching that is properly Jewish, but that had been lost to us due to

the circumstances of history and exile.[6] The truth of this historical reconstruction is not our present concern. What is important is the recognition that Judaism may be lacking and that other spiritual traditions may be in a healthier condition. They may be able to sustain and inspire it, even as they help it regain its own former teaching and glory. Thus awareness of our own imperfection can open the door to a genuine openness to the other.

The question of religious particularity is relevant to all aspects of a Jewish consideration of other religions and raises some fundamental issues. I will list four that all touch upon the meaning of particularity, on the one hand, and the potential for pluralistic views, on the other.

1. Can a religious or spiritual path outside Judaism be considered legitimate and valid? As strange as this question seems at first blush, especially in the contexts of interreligious dialogue and of a pluralistic world-view, it is an essential part of the Jewish agenda for contemporary reflection. The legitimacy of other forms of religious life is far from self-evident. The issue touches on the question of the spiritual vision offered by Judaism to the non-Jew and calls for an assessment of other religions within a broader historical perspective. This question touches the core of the pluralistic potential within Judaism.

2. Defining idolatry. The notion of idolatry—or more correctly the notion of foreign worship (*avodah zarah*), worship by methods or of objects foreign to prescribed Jewish worship—orients most Jewish legal and theological discussions of other religions. Despite the centrality of the concept, we are a long way from accounting for its meaning even today. Conflicting positions are articulated in Jewish sources regarding fundamental questions concerning *avodah zarah*. Moreover, we are far from having a considered systematic discussion of the fundamental question: what is *avodah zarah*? As simple as this question 'What is *avodah zarah*?' seems at first sight, further reflection reveals that we do not have a sufficient definition or grasp of such a fundamental concept. This question is vital, not only for our view of other traditions, but also for Judaism's self-understanding. We often encounter the claim that the battle against *avodah zarah* is fundamental to Judaism's very identity as a religious tradition. But then, what is *avodah zarah* today? Answering this question contains the key, at least in part, to Judaism's identity and mission, and hence to the enduring significance of Judaism on the global stage.

3. Revelation and Truth. The attitude to other religions is often seen as a competition between conflicting truths or between different conceptions of truths. The notion of truth introduces into the religious conversation a philo-

[6] See Paul Fenton, 'Abraham Maimonides (1187–1237): Founding a Mystical Dynasty', in Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (eds.), *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century* (Northvale, NJ, 1998), 127–54.

sophical or conceptual notion through which religion is defined. However, religious truth does not see itself primarily as the outcome of philosophical speculation but more properly as the fruit of revelation. Grounding truth in divine revelation affords it absolute validity, thereby making relations between religions more complicated, to the degree that different religions appeal to mutually conflicting or competing truth or revelational claims. How might a Jew preserve the significance of Sinaitic revelation, while neutralizing its 'truth' element? Alternatively, how can one uphold a notion of religious truth that is open to a pluralistic understanding of other religions?

4. Concern for Jewish continuity and identity. This is not a philosophical concern, yet it touches the heart of Jewish religious thought, inasmuch as it affirms particularity as a core concern. The underlying assumption of all Jewish reflection on other religions is that they are competitive, and therefore constitute a threat to Judaism in terms of loyalty, membership, and affiliation. An 'us versus them' mentality is deeply ingrained in Jewish approaches to other religions. Even if other religions are not deemed idolatrous and are recognized as legitimate for their believers, there always remain concerns about losing members to other religions. This concern may in fact drive issues 1, 2, and 3. The positions we take in relation to other religions may serve this particular agenda, even when this is not made explicit.

THE LEGITIMACY OF OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

In considering the legitimacy of other religious traditions, one must first distinguish between the legitimacy of religions that turn to other gods and those whose adherents understand themselves to be addressing the same God that Jews turn to: Christianity and Islam.[7] This distinction leads us to the biblical heritage of battles against contemporary idolatrous beliefs. Reconciling the biblical anti-idolatry stance and contemporary pluralistic sensibilities is a tall order. To the extent that biblical views continue to inform Jewish attitudes to other religions throughout the generations, one must recognize that a strong anti-pluralist tendency shapes Jewish attitudes to other religions.

Although prima facie there is no room for recognizing religions that turn to other gods as legitimate and acceptable, there may be alternative approaches

[7] The roundabout wording that emphasizes self-understanding stems from the fact that a Jewish view of the Christian God is not as unequivocal in the recognition that it is the same God that is being worshipped as many Christians assume. This issue was recently highlighted through the discussion engendered by the Jewish statement on Christianity *Dabru emet*. The opening clause of the statement affirmed the common belief in the same God. Objections were raised to this claim, in the light of Trinitarian belief. See Jon Levenson, 'How Not to Conduct Jewish–Christian Dialogue', *Commentary*, 112/5 (2001), 36–7.

with regard to such faiths. Rabbi Menahem Me'iri, a fourteenth-century Provencal rabbinic authority, articulated such a position in relation to Christianity and Islam.[8] According to Me'iri, Christianity and Islam should not be considered *avodah zarah*, as many rabbinic authorities then and now maintained. The common understanding of Me'iri explains his views as a consequence of the fact that both religions have an ethical code that enforces morality, law, and order. Me'iri posits a moral criterion, in light of which these religions are viewed. Such a criterion would also be valid in relation to religions of the East and other religions that do not know Israel's God. Me'iri's understanding provides a basis for interreligious pluralism that shifts the discussion from theological to moral considerations. Accordingly, there is a fundamental basis for pluralism that is grounded in human perfection, as expressed in the moral and social order. The type of pluralism of this approach is limited since it does not apply to the conceptual and theological realm. It does, nevertheless, provide a basis for tolerance on a practical level and for mutual acceptance and respect between members of different religions that share the same moral foundation.

A closer look at Me'iri reveals that underlying his recognition of other religions is more than simply recognition of their moral value. As Moshe Halbertal has shown, Me'iri has a highly developed sense of what constitutes a religion.[9] Rather than simply present Christianity and Islam as non-idolatrous, Me'iri describes them as 'religions'. His appeal to the category of 'religion' assumes certain parameters by which a religion is recognized as valid. These parameters include the moral dimension, but the argument from morality does not simply point to God directly. It appeals to the notion of 'religion' as common and recognized ground between religions. Recognizing the centrality of the category 'religion' and 'the ways of religion' in Me'iri's thought allows us to extend his views of other religions and their legitimacy to religions that had not previously been considered in his discussion.[10] More significantly in the present context, it tackles the very issue of the legitimacy of other religions. The appeal to 'religion' as a means of legitimating other religions assumes that other religions, when recognized and classified as such, have validity. Fundamental to Me'iri's understanding therefore is the recognition that true or valid 'religion' is not limited to Judaism.

[8] See Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish–Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (London, 1961).

[9] Moshe Halbertal, 'Ones Possessed of Religion: Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of the Me'iri', *Edah Journal*, 1/1 (2000), <http://www.edah.org>.

[10] In my forthcoming *Beyond Idolatry: The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism*, I spend much time exploring the implications of Me'iri's views for a possible Jewish appreciation of Hinduism, both according to the more common 'moral' understanding of Me'iri and according to the understanding that reads Me'iri as developing the category of 'religion' as the validating principle of other religions. See also the discussion in Chapter 11 below.

The desire to protect Judaism's uniqueness and particularity and to justify its continued sense of chosenness and mission has led over the course of generations to a shift from combat against religions that call upon other gods to religions that offer an alternative path to the same God. The deep tension between the two constitutive features of Judaism—a religious way of life for a specific people and a universal spiritual vision—affects the varying positions in relation to these religions. When the national/ethnic component of Judaism is emphasized, it is easier to allow other religions to fill a vacuum that Judaism never sought to fill. Emphasizing the national element in Judaism's self-understanding enables us to adopt in principle a perspective on world religions from the viewpoint of the divine economy that justifies their existence and purpose, while it continues to uphold the meaning of Judaism and its particularity. By contrast, emphasizing the universal 'objective' religious truth of Judaism's teachings makes such acknowledgement more challenging.

Emphasis on the national pole of religious identity not only facilitates adoption of a pluralistic perspective, it also allows us to develop a position that accounts for other religions from the perspective of Israel's particular story. In relation to both Christianity and Islam we find, alongside extensive polemical literature, positions that recognize their legitimacy. There are various strategies for affording such legitimacy. These religions can be considered in the light of the notion of the seven Noahide commandments, the basic moral commandments seen as the minimal behavioural requirement for non-Jews, who did not receive the revelation at Sinai.[11] The revelation of these commandments to Adam and Noah provides an alternative matrix by means of which non-Jews too can have a valid revelation. According to such an understanding, Christianity and Islam are legitimate, as their religious teachings include the Noahide commandments.[12] These religions are thus interpreted in the light of a certain concept that is deemed by the Jewish interpreter to be crucial, regardless of the theological emphasis by which these traditions define and understand themselves.

A different strategy for affording legitimacy is the incorporation of these traditions into Israel's story or the divine plan for humanity. Rabbi Jacob Emden (eighteenth century) presented Christianity as seeking to disseminate the Noahide commandments to non-Jews in an attempt to confer legitimacy upon Christianity as a religious phenomenon that has a different intended audience than the community of Israel.[13] Not only is the practice of Christianity

[11] They are the prohibitions on killing, adultery, idolatry, blasphemy, theft, and the eating of the limbs of a living animal, as well as the obligation to institute a legal system to address civil concerns.

[12] See David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2011); see also Eugene Korn in Chapter 8, below.

[13] See Harvey Falk, 'Rabbi Jacob Emden's Views on Christianity', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*,

justified, but its story is retold and incorporated into Israel's story. Jesus and Paul become, according to Emden, missionaries for a cause that is properly speaking Jewish, inasmuch as they disseminate and propagate an ideal and a teaching of Judaism in relation to humanity. If Judaism is not only a philosophical world-view, but is related to the particular story of its carrier, the Jewish people, one of the ways of dealing with alternative religious traditions is to incorporate them within the particular Jewish story. The pluralism incorporated in such views is not a principled and a priori pluralism. The acceptance of the Other and the recognition of his legitimacy take place in a limited way, based upon internal Jewish criteria. This is inclusivist pluralism, according to which the degree of pluralism that is possible is a function of the degree to which the other can be interpreted and incorporated within the Jewish world-view, considered on its own terms.[14]

Consideration of the legitimacy of alternative religious systems is inextricably linked to two issues. The first is eschatological expectation. What is the future of other peoples and religions in our view of the eschaton? Does Judaism's eschatological world-view assume that only one religion will reign in the future? To recognize the legitimacy of other religions we must determine who Judaism was intended for. In other words, are Jewish practice and ideals a way of life designed for the Jewish people only or are they a vision for all of humanity in the eschaton? Jewish aspirations for the future make it easier or harder to develop pluralist positions to the degree to which these visions cast the future of humanity in the same light as Israel's present-day reality.[15] An exclusivist eschatological view can be influenced by two factors: the tension between Jews and non-Jews carried over into the religious sphere and the understanding of religion in terms of truth and hence the necessity of truth's ultimate victory.[16]

19 (1982), 105–11; Blu Greenberg, 'Rabbi Jacob Emden: The Views of an Enlightened Traditionalist on Christianity', *Judaism*, 27 (1978), 351–68.

[14] The categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, initially developed by Alan Race as part of his own thinking within a Christian theology of religions, have been examined extensively by Alan Brill and applied to Jewish sources in his recent *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York, 2010); see also Alan Brill in Chapter 1, below.

[15] On this issue, see Chaim Rapoport, '*Dat ha-emet* in Maimonides' Mishneh Torah', *Meorot*, 7/1 (2008); Menachem Kellner, 'Maimonides' "True Religion": For Jews or All Humanity? A Response to Chaim Rapoport', *Meorot*, 7/1 (2008). Both available from <www.yctorah.org/content/view/436/10/>.

[16] For extreme forms of exclusivist eschatological expectations, see Israel Jacob Yuval, 'Revenge and Curse, Blood and Libel' (Heb.), *Zion*, 58 (1983), 37–44. An English version appears in id., *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006). The matter is discussed in David Berger, 'On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Ashkenazi Polemical Literature', in id., *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish–Christian Relations* (Boston, 2010), 109–38.

It is difficult to provide an unequivocal position concerning Judaism's eschatological world-view. Eschatology lies beyond the realm of normativity and common agreement. Different images of the eschaton developed over millennia, reflecting the physical and psychological conditions as well as the spiritual aspirations of the different visionaries. These visions often contradict each other, and the cardinal question of the status of non-Jews in the eschaton has conflicting answers. A contemporary Jewish theology of world religions must therefore study and reflect upon the different Jewish eschatological views concerning other religions, considering the social and historical conditions under which they were shaped, their theological import, and their normative weight. All these are part of the theological challenge of this contemporary enterprise.

A second question regarding the legitimacy of other religions is what Judaism has to offer to non-Jews in today's world rather than in the eschaton. To the extent that this is deemed insufficient or does not satisfy the spiritual needs of non-Jews, space is created for other religions to fulfil these needs. As mentioned, the national element in Judaism restrains it from actively spreading its message to other peoples. Consequently, Judaism's primary teachings for the non-Jew are the Noahide commandments. These commandments are not simply good counsel, but constitute Judaism's spiritual vision for humanity. A non-Jew may either follow full revelation, the Torah received at Sinai, or settle for a limited revelation, the moral code of the Noahide commandments. The Noahide commandments are thus part of a comprehensive view that attempts to offer a way of life considered adequate for the non-Jew.

This view has serious consequences for the meaning of religion outside of Judaism. As Maimonides states:

> One does not permit [non-Jews] to invent a new religion and to perform commandments that they make up. One must either be a convert [to Judaism] and accept all commandments, or let one remain bound by the teaching relevant to him [the Noahide commandments], without adding or detracting.[17]

Forbidding other forms of religion is a consequence of the exclusivist view, according to which Judaism also provides the religious vision and practical instruction needed for non-Jews. If a religious programme for humanity exists in the form of the Noahide commandments, the prohibition of developing alternative novel religions constitutes its correlate.

Other understandings of the seven Noahide commandments blunt this exclusivist understanding to some degree. Some Jewish thinkers have identified the Noahide commandments with natural law, thus justifying them and making them easier to accept on rational, non-revelational grounds. Natural law offers an inclusivist perspective into which the Noahide commandments

[17] Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Kings', 10: 9.

are assumed. Seeing them in terms of creation, rather than of revelation, neutralizes the exclusiveness of the revelation-based perspective. At the same time, it emphasizes the moral dimension, which is available to all.

Yet this understanding also highlights the difficulty in presenting the Noahide commandments as a religious path for humanity. They provide a sound moral foundation, thereby fulfilling one of religion's important tasks. However, they lack a fundamental dimension of the religious life: the development of a relationship with God. Everything related to worship, to a personal relationship with God, to emotional and religious intimacy, and to the fulfilment of emotional and religious needs is beyond the scope of the Noahide commandments. It is difficult to limit the import of religion to the moral life only. A full religious life implies much more than upright ethical living. If all Judaism has to offer to those who do not enter its covenantal framework is a moral way of life, one must consider whether Judaism has a spiritual message to offer the world, short of conversion to Judaism itself.

While the seven Noahide commandments are fundamentally a moral code, they have in fact been broadened and made to serve as a basic form of religious life. Some of the stipulations and reflections concerning their observance have tackled the fundamental limitations built into the concept. Maimonides played a key role in the development of the notion of the Noahide commandments as possessors of broader religious significance. According to him, the Noahide commandments have salvific value, if observed as a form of revelation given to Moses.[18] This stipulation introduces cognitive and salvific dimensions into what might otherwise have been conceived primarily as a moral category. This makes it possible for later authorities to expand the dimension of faith implied in the observance of the Noahide commandments beyond the authoritarian foundations demanded by Maimonides. Thus, they come to include faith in God and the possibility of a life of prayer.[19]

Despite the appeal to the Noahide commandments for developing a broader religious framework, use of this category stops short of developing a fully fledged concept of non-Jewish religion. Maimonides provided a good illustration of the dynamics of the category and how far it can go. Injecting the category with religious and salvific meaning should be considered in the light of his refusal to recognize other forms of religious life as legitimate and hence the prohibition placed upon the birth of other religions. Minimal and maximal

[18] See Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Kings', 8: 11. One notes, however, that the salvific value of the commandments is dependent on their performance as commandments given to Moses. Hardly anyone who practises these commandments in the framework of another religion does so because of the Mosaic revelation.

[19] See R. Moshe Feinstein, *Igerot mosheh*, 'Oraḥ ḥayim', 2: 25. A discussion of the Noahide commandments and how the category has been broadened can be found in my forthcoming *Israel in God's Presence*.

revelations are all that Judaism has to offer and all that it recognizes. In this context it is worth returning to Me'iri and his use of the category 'religion' as a means of assessing and legitimating other religions. As indicated, his appeal to this category assumes, unlike Maimonides', that other religions have legitimacy. In conformity with this understanding, we note the absence in Me'iri of the prohibition of inventing ritual for religions other than Judaism. Me'iri's broader recognition and acceptance of other religions is thus not limited to their moral dimension, but also includes ritual life, which he recognizes as legitimate as well.[20]

A discussion of the legitimacy of other religions must examine not only the traditional literary and historical sources that formulated attitudes to other religions, but also the phenomenological dimension of other religions, the actual spiritual reality associated with them and their practitioners. An unbiased examination of the spiritual life of other religions will teach us that they have the potential to produce the same fruits of spiritual excellence in their believers to which Judaism also aspires. In addition to moral excellence, these include the development of a religious life and spiritual sensitivity, the formation of a religious personality in the light of the ideals of holiness and accomplishment and fulfilment of a life of prayer as a constitutive element of the religious life. In this context, one should note, in particular, phenomena associated with answering prayers and performing miracles, as these find expression in stories of the lives of saints of other traditions. In the context of interreligious polemic, my 'true' religion is expressed in miracles, and the 'false' miracles of the other's religion are nothing but magic. A perspective that does not negate a priori the spiritual validity of the other's religious life could discover important parallels between the spiritual lives of believers of different religions. If indeed a phenomenological examination of other traditions leads to the discovery of authentic religious life, what are the implications of this recognition for the development of a contemporary theology of world religions? The discovery of significant parallels with the spiritual lives of adherents of other religions shifts our attention from theological considerations to the phenomenological common ground of different religions. The recognition that religious life is much more than the articulation of a belief system and the appropriate actions that accompany it can lead us to the recognition that in certain contexts there is a de facto equivalence between how different religions operate. Does this have any theological or theoretical consequences?

Me'iri opened the door to the acceptance of the Other on the basis of empirical behaviour. His empirical criteria appealed to the moral domain, and more

[20] See Gerald Blidstein, 'Maimonides and Me'iri on the Legitimacy of Non-Judaic Religion', in Leo Landman (ed.), *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures* (New York, 1990), 27–37.

broadly to an implicit phenomenology of religion, in view of which a religion is considered among the religions and therefore legitimate. The application of Me'iri's approach to other areas of the spiritual life and the examination of other religions from a phenomenological perspective of religious excellence, spirituality, and so on, might allow us to identify additional foci through which we can express an appreciation of other religions. To the extent that these dimensions are considered fundamental and critical to the ultimate purpose of religion, an appreciation based upon recognition of these dimensions would itself be more principled and fundamental.

WORLD RELIGIONS AND THE PROBLEM OF *AVODAH ZARAH*

Let us begin by posing a question of principle, regarding how the category of *avodah zarah* is applied in the framework of theology of religions. Is *avodah zarah* an internal Jewish category, relevant for Jews and the limits of our own religious practices, or is it a category by means of which we should assess the inherent value of alternative systems of belief? Does the halakhic ruling that the practices of a given religion are considered *avodah zarah* mean that the religion is invalid and valueless also for its adherents? When Isaiah mocks idol worshippers,[21] he seems to be making a statement that is relevant not only for believers in the God of Israel but also for the idol worshippers themselves. This may not necessarily be the case for the later halakhic application of the category of *avodah zarah*. I am not certain that the halakhic application of *avodah zarah* must be construed as the total negation and invalidation of the spiritual value and potential benefit to the believers of religious systems to which the category is applied. Halakhic attention is usually paid to the ways in which other religious systems affect Jewish believers and to the consequences of their practices on Jewish practice and belief. The halakhah, as a legal system, may not have intended to make metaphysical assertions and claims regarding alternative spiritual systems, their validity and value.[22]

The question hinges on whether the prohibition of and the criteria for *avodah zarah* are identical for a Jew and a non-Jew. This is itself a matter of debate between different halakhic authorities, and, as I shall presently show, the source of varying opinions concerning Christianity and its status as *avodah zarah*. For Maimonides, *avodah zarah* applies in the same way to Jews and non-Jews.[23] Nahmanides, by contrast, assumes different expectations of Jews and non-Jews in terms of the life of worship. While Jews must worship God alone,

[21] See e.g. Isa. 44: 9–20.

[22] The point and its philosophical implications are analysed by Eugene Korn in Chapter 8, below.

[23] See Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Kings', 9: 2.

non-Jews may worship the heavenly ministers, appointed to look after them, provided they remain mindful of the ultimate presence of God.[24] Thus, *avodah zarah* could mean one thing when applied to Jews, and another when applied to non-Jews. This difference of opinion, often overlooked in discussions of religions as *avodah zarah*, is significant for any consideration of world religions. While Nahmanides' views are articulated in a commentarial, rather than a halakhic, framework, the distinction itself, and the difference of opinion that legal authorities have in relation to Maimonides' views, is quite explicit also in halakhic discussions. Rabbenu Tam (twelfth century) claims that Christianity should not be considered *avodah zarah*, because Christians, as part of humanity coming under the obligations of the Noahide commandments, are not prohibited from worshipping another being alongside God.[25] This position assumes one should consider Christianity from a dual perspective. For us as Jews it is *avodah zarah*. For Christian believers it is not. This stance is of huge potential significance. *Avodah zarah* is not necessarily a category that establishes metaphysical truths or that determines the legitimacy of belief systems for their believers. Rather, it is a category that regulates the relations of the Jewish faithful to their God and the boundaries of those relations, as they encounter alternative faith systems. If we adopt such a distinction, the way is opened for interesting consideration of the significance, or lack thereof, of *avodah zarah* as a category that shapes a Jewish theology of world religions.[26]

The recognition that *avodah zarah* plays a constitutive role in the shaping of Jewish identity, theology, and world-view pushes us to reflect further upon its meaning, beyond the framework of the halakhic discussion whose interest is to determine whether particular forms of worship of different religious systems should be considered *avodah zarah*. Like other core religious concepts, expressed in normative and legal terms, there is always the danger that a controlling principle, one of the overarching spiritual concerns of the religious system, might get translated into a series of dos and don'ts. Through such a translation, it may be reduced to these practical applications and identified with them, causing us to lose sight of the ultimate spiritual concerns underlying the particular instructions. Does the spiritual concern that leads to the prominence of *avodah zarah* in Jewish discourse find sufficient expression in the practical

[24] See Nahmanides, *Perush al hatorah* on Exod. 20: 2; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'Other Gods in the Teaching of Nahmanides: Theoretical Constructions and their Implications for a Possible View of Other Religions' (Heb.), in U. Ehrlich et al. (eds.), *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein* [Al pi habe'er: meḥkarim behagut yehudit uvemaḥashevet hahalakhah mugashim leya'akov blidshtein] (Be'er Sheva, 2008), 25–82.

[25] The technical term for such belief is *shituf*, worship through association of another being alongside God. For a discussion of Rabbenu Tam's position, see Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 34–6; David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Oxford, 2001), 157–77.

[26] The point is developed further by Eugene Korn in Chapter 8, below.

halakhic considerations of *avodah zarah*? Conceptually, *avodah zarah* is the negative expression of our very own identity. It represents the very thing to which we are opposed, and in relation to which we establish our own identity. To define *avodah zarah* is, in a significant way, to define ourselves. It is therefore difficult to assume that Judaism's fundamental battle, for the sake of which the Creator of heaven and earth revealed himself to his people, should be limited to opposition to forms of worship of God that rely on graven images or even to refined theological formulations that are found lacking in comparison with alternative notions of the understanding of divine unity. If not, what is *avodah zarah* and what is its contemporary expression? It seems that identifying and combating *avodah zarah* is to a large extent a test, an indication, of our own identity. To the extent that Jews face some kind of spiritual identity crisis, this crisis is also indirectly expressed in what seems to me our inability to meaningfully apply the category of *avodah zarah* in anything but a technical way.

Most of the sources in which *avodah zarah* is addressed seek to deal with some concrete problem. The problem is usually associated with the common life of Jews and members of other religions. Historically, most of our references to issues of *avodah zarah* come from dealings with Christianity. The focus upon the practical concerns of daily coexistence can divert attention from the broader theoretical and metaphysical questions that ought to guide our discussion of world religions. Theologically, we ought to engage in thoughtful and systematic consideration of what *avodah zarah* really is. What is the moral component in *avodah zarah* that might make it as repulsive as it is represented in our sources? To what degree is the issue one of proper faith, of correct practice, or of the totality of life as it is shaped by religion? To what extent does the fundamental distinction and tension between Jews and non-Jews also shape how the religious difference between Judaism and other religions is constructed? And to what extent does the view of other religions as *avodah zarah* express concrete historical pressures of a given period? The discussion of each of these questions has far-reaching consequences for a theology of world religions, and a serious discussion of these questions has barely begun.

Over the past thousand years, concerns about *avodah zarah* have been the subject of discussion primarily in relation to Christianity. The discussions of halakhic authorities with regard to Christianity establish the governing paradigms of attitudes to other world religions. A presentation of core rabbinic attitudes to Christianity thus has significant consequences for any discussion of the implications of *avodah zarah* for a view of world religions. In this context, I would like to present three positions that emerged in medieval halakhic discussions of Christianity.

The most extreme position is often identified with Maimonides, even though many other scholars, in various diasporas, took it for granted.

According to this position, Christianity is *avodah zarah*, for all intents and purposes. Belief in the Trinity and the Incarnation, along with the worship of statues, leads almost by default to the view that Christianity is idolatry.[27] Obviously, this view disregards Christianity's own self-understanding as worshipping the one God, the God of Israel, and does not leave much room for interreligious pluralism. *Avodah zarah* as a category points away from pluralism and tolerance, by passing a harsh judgement and rejecting particular religious systems. Unconditional application of the notion of *avodah zarah* to any religion will lead to viewpoints that do not enable true acceptance of it. At best, they can sustain a de facto tolerance, based on keeping one's distance and upholding that distance as legitimate and expressive of as much respect as can be mustered for the sake of a 'live and let live' ideology. Genuine acceptance and legitimization of the other is not possible when *avodah zarah* is fully evoked.

At the other end of the spectrum one finds the position of Me'iri, whom we have already discussed. According to his view, Christianity should not be considered *avodah zarah*. Christianity has a moral code and grounds an ordered way of life in the recognition of God. It is, for Me'iri, a 'religion', in other words a valid form of the religious life. This raises it above the rank of other religions of old, which lacked such an ordered moral life and in relation to which the status of *avodah zarah* applied. Differences in theological world-view are not, in and of themselves, sufficient grounds for declaring another religion *avodah zarah*. Famous in this respect is the following quote: 'Nations that are bound by the ways of religion and believe in His (blessed be He) existence, His Unity and His power, even though they are in error concerning some matters, according to our faith, the rules discussed above do not apply to them.'[28] Ultimately, for Me'iri, Jews and Christians believe in the same God, even if there are theological variations in how he is understood. Believing in the same God is the other side of the coin of not considering a religion as *avodah zarah*. Having identified criteria in light of which Christianity is understood as believing in the same God, the laws applying to *avodah zarah* are considered as not applicable to Christianity.

[27] It should be noted that in actual fact Maimonides does not make it clear why he sees Christianity as *avodah zarah*. Nowhere does he state explicitly that the problem is theological (i.e. the Trinity), rather than practical (i.e. worship of icons or Jesus). Scholars can only speculate as to why he held these views and how they cohere with his broader world-view. In terms of my own reading of Maimonides, the most likely reason for considering Christianity as *avodah zarah* is that another being other than God is worshipped. For Maimonides (*Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Idolatry', 2: 1), this is the core definition of *avodah zarah*. This understanding may be alluded to in 'Laws of Kings', 11: 4. On Maimonides and Christianity, see Howard Kreisel, 'Maimonides on Christianity and Islam', in Ronald Brauner (ed.), *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies* (Philadelphia, 1985), iii. 156. See also David Novak in Chapter 9, below.

[28] Me'iri, *Beit habeḥirah* on *Git. 62a*. In other words, the laws relating to idol worshippers do not apply to them and these nations are considered to be beyond *avodah zarah*.

A median position is that of Rabbenu Tam, to whom we have also already had recourse.[29] His position was initially articulated in the framework of challenges arising from day-to-day coexistence and the need to maintain ongoing commercial ties with neighbouring Christians. It permitted commercial relations, even though they entailed taking oaths, thereby causing Christians to take an oath in their God's name. As stated, Rabbenu Tam's reasoning was that Noahides, that is, non-Israelites, were not prohibited from worshipping another being alongside God, and hence could, in this instance, take an oath in Jesus' name. Accordingly, worship through association of another being with God is fundamentally different to *avodah zarah*. *Avodah zarah* constitutes a denial and rejection of God. Worship by association, *shituf*, impairs the exclusiveness of worship due to God alone, but does not violate the recognition of the true God. Finding the point of contact and association with the God known to Israel enables acceptance and validation of a worship that would be deemed wrong for Israel itself. Thus, we find here a mechanism by means of which another religion is validated for its practitioners. Full rejection is replaced by de facto acceptance in the context of everyday life. This is accomplished by interpreting the meaning of Christian worship through categories particular to Jewish discourse,[30] rather than in terms of the Christian faith itself.[31] While Rabbenu Tam's position started out as a practical solution for issues of day-to-day coexistence, its later reworkings amount to a principled

[29] Rabbenu Tam's views and their halakhic consequences are covered in detail by Eugene Korn in Chapter 8, below.

[30] Insufficient attention has been given to whether the category of *shituf*, central to so much Jewish reflection on Christianity, is really appropriate for describing Christian faith (see Rabbi Jacob Emden, *She'ilat ya'avets*, 1: 41, and my discussion in *Beyond Idolatry*).

[31] Such an interpretation would, of course, have actually increased the acceptability of Christian worship, inasmuch as it would have integrated the Christian effort to uphold belief in the one God, despite a Trinitarian understanding of that God. Jewish thinkers, however, could not affirm Christian monotheism by accepting the Christian understanding of the triune divinity. Historical tensions precluded the integration of these understandings as indications of Christianity's intention to uphold monotheism. In the context of monotheism and the problem of *avodah zarah*, future Jewish reflection on Christianity might consider whether recognizing this intention, as expressed in the history of articulating the nature of the Trinitarian understanding of God, can be divorced from accepting the theological claims and understanding proper to Christian faith. This might be one theological, and even halakhic, move that is enabled by the new situation created by changes in Jewish–Christian relations. One precedent for openness to accepting Christian self-understanding on its own terms is provided by Yehudah Aryeh Leib de Modena (see Daniel Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2007), 81–2). His willingness to recognize the legitimacy of Trinitarian belief, understood in a particular way, is complemented by a rejection of the doctrine of the Incarnation, hence of Christian faith. Even more important in procedural terms is the investigation of Christianity by Rabbi Yosef Mesas, *Shut mayim ḥayim*, pt. 2, 'Yoreh de'ah', 108. This discussion, completely tangential in terms of halakhic precedent and marginal in terms of its impact on halakhic discourse, is a model for learning, dialogue, and openness as the foundations for any Jewish consideration of another religion.

acceptance of Christianity as a religion, valid for its believers.[32] Thus Rabbenu Tam's halakhic solution ends up providing the basis for a broader theory of tolerance and of what might, in present-day terms, be considered interreligious pluralism.[33] One extreme expression of such legitimacy is found in an early twentieth-century rabbinic ruling that allows Jews to contribute financially towards the construction of a church, based on Christianity's halakhic status as permitted *shituf*.[34] What might have been initially thought of as a permissible form of *avodah zarah*[35] has become in its later reworkings a principle of almost full acceptance of the legitimacy of the religion of the Other.[36]

The Middle Ages have left us with a heritage of varying positions on Christianity. The fact is we have advanced remarkably little beyond these fundamental discussions and their reiterations. Present-day halakhic Judaism continues to speak in a multiplicity of voices, echoing the earlier halakhic–theological polyphony. Maintaining a plurality of positions, rather than narrowing down the range of legitimate options, is in and of itself laudable. However, in terms of theoretical reflection on Christianity's status as *avodah zarah* (as opposed to reflection on its mission within the divine economy or on its relationship to Judaism) we have moved little beyond where we were several hundred years ago. On the one hand we must revisit the heritage of the Middle Ages and consider the criteria in the light of which we adopt one position or another. This includes revisiting the history of reception of the three positions, their internal evolution, the criteria by which we determine *avodah zarah*, and the possibility of reaching consensus. But even more significantly, this must include a re-engagement with the religions under discussion, starting with Christianity, in an attempt to consider whether earlier positions offered an

[32] See Jacob Katz, 'The Vicissitude of Three Apologetic Passages' (Heb.), *Zion*, 23–4 (1958–9), 181–6.

[33] For a contemporary articulation of this view, in relation to world religions, see my lengthy discussion of Adin Steinsaltz in Chapter 11, below.

[34] See David Ellenson, 'Jewish Covenant and Christian Trinitarianism: An Analysis of a Responsum on Jewish–Christian Relations in the Modern World', *Jewish Civilization*, 3 (1985), 85–100; see also Rabbi Herzl Henkin, *Shut benei banim*, iii, §36 (Jerusalem, 1998); for further analysis, see Eugene Korn in Chapter 8, below.

[35] If Berger is correct (*The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, 176).

[36] Little attention has been paid to the extension of validation through *shituf* to religions other than Christianity. An important step in this direction, in relation to Eastern religions, is made by Isaac Herzog, 'Minority Rights According to the Halakhah' (Heb.), *Tehumin*, 2 (1981), 178–9. Without claiming that the category extends to them, he entertains the possibility and assumes that only proper study of those religions can determine the issue. It is regrettable that contemporary halakhic decisors fail to study Eastern religions properly prior to issuing halakhic rulings concerning them, a move taken for granted by Herzog. Another important discussion is Adin Steinsaltz, 'Peace without Conciliation: The Irrelevance of "Toleration" in Judaism', *Common Knowledge*, 11/1 (2005), 41–7. I discuss Steinsaltz's presentation in great detail in *Beyond Idolatry* and in Chapter 11 below.

appropriate portrayal and whether the multiple theological understandings within Christianity, especially those that may have emerged since the fundamental positions were first articulated, might necessitate revisiting our view of the religion. For 600 years we have been engaging with halakhic texts and their internal discourse in relation to Christianity. But we have failed to seriously engage with Christian theology itself, and we continue to do so. The twenty-first century began with a similar dynamic in relation to Hinduism, when halakhic decisors engaged with it in a global way. Again, the discussion was internal halakhic discourse, failing completely to engage with Hindu theology or religion in and of itself.[37] If there is anything that should characterize the desired perspective of a contemporary theology of world religions it is that we ought to engage the religions on their own terms, theologically, as a precondition for making pronouncements on those religions. Even if we end up reaffirming old positions, the times and the challenges at hand demand, at the very least, that the procedures by which we evaluate another religion conform to the standards of knowledge and listening that the present day makes possible and even mandates.

REVELATION, TRUTH, AND WORLD RELIGIONS

Judaism is grounded in revelation. This could theoretically lead to a denial of any legitimacy to other religions that would be perceived as competing with Judaism's truth or distorting it. As suggested above, when faith in revelation is coupled with the notion of election this might suggest that Judaism has nothing to learn from others and that truth and falsehood are the best way of describing the relations between Judaism and other religions.

Understanding revelation in terms of truth leads to some reflections on the contribution of philosophical understandings to our discussion. Consideration of Judaism's attitudes to other religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, must take into account the conceptual framework within which these attitudes took shape and the centrality of philosophical discourse to shaping Judaism's wrestling with these religions. The philosophical heritage plays a dual role. On the one hand, it provides important precedents and opens before us interesting possibilities, in the light of which we might reflect upon these issues. The philosophical tradition is an important resource for contemporary reflection, having produced significant positions both for and against and recognizing varying degrees of validity in other religions. On the other hand, the articulation of religious questions in philosophical language could further empower

[37] A critique of the halakhic proceedings in this light was offered by Daniel Sperber, 'How Not to Make Halakhic Rulings', *Conversations: The Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals*, 5 (Sept. 2009), 1–11, available at <http://www.jewishideas.org/articles/how-not-make-halakhic-rulings>. I deal with this issue at greater length in Chapter 11, below.

exclusivistic religious understandings. A contemporary theology of world religions could thus be built upon philosophical precedents, while being hampered by those very same precedents. The point is particularly relevant when the philosophical heritage is considered historically, in relation to earlier stages of Jewish reflection captured in biblical and rabbinic literature. One of the great conceptual changes heralded by the philosophical tradition is the way that the language of truth and falsehood is used.[38] This conceptual emphasis confronts the attempt to create a contemporary theology of world religions with particular challenges.

The precedent provided by medieval Jewish philosophy was based upon a common philosophical language and understanding. The philosophers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all related to this common philosophical infrastructure, which allows us to identify commonalities and mutual appreciation. Alas, today we do not possess a common philosophical language or tradition that shapes our religions. Today it is universal moral challenges that religions struggle with. The common denominators driving interreligious dialogue are the needs of the human person and of humanity, not metaphysical concerns. This emphasis upon the human person and humanity diverts attention from classical religious issues, thereby making the philosophical heritage less relevant as a meeting ground. Moreover, whereas philosophical discourse was limited to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, contemporary emphasis upon the human (and ecological) condition broadens the frame of reference and areas of concern beyond the boundaries of the philosophical–religious encounter between the religions.

Understanding religious concepts in terms of truth introduces into religious discourse an exclusiveness that is grounded in the philosophical understanding of truth and falsehood. Relating to other religions in these terms constitutes a change from the thought of earlier periods. Understanding religious issues in philosophical terms will lead to understanding philosophical truth as the substance of revelation. According to this understanding, truth is the highest value of the religious world-view. That is, religion and all of its details are understood as truth. One additional consequence of this identification, though belied by some historical precedents, is the exclusive identification of truth with 'our' religion. Truth is 'our' lot, while others are mired in falsehood.

The prominence of this religious understanding is such that it is often assumed to be the natural religious world-view, without seriously questioning its historical and conceptual roots. Contemporary reflection upon world

[38] The language itself is used already in the Bible, e.g. Jer. 10: 14; 16: 9. However, the meaning of truth in pre-philosophical usage is very different from its philosophical meaning. As the context of these typical examples suggests, truth is relational and touches upon the authenticity of religious relationships and the efficacy of worship and the spiritual path. Such application of 'truth' must be approached differently than the later philosophical application of the term.

religions must therefore articulate a position on the application of truth as the yardstick by which one's own religion is compared to others. There are, in principle, three possible positions in relation to this issue:

1. Upholding, in principle, the understanding of religion as theological truth, while ignoring, de facto, issues of truth and falsehood in the context of interreligious relations.
2. Maintaining the notion of truth, while refining it in ways appropriate to contemporary challenges and needs.
3. Abandoning truth as a primary means of presenting religion, and preferring alternative religious views and languages.

Let us briefly consider each of these three strategies.

The first possibility serves many of the people engaged in interreligious dialogue and collaboration. The need for concrete collaboration leads them to ignore issues of truth and falsehood, even though they are theologically central to the religions. Truths are seen as the private affair of the believers and their religions, but beyond the pale of practical interreligious collaboration. The decision to ignore the great metaphysical questions that distinguish one religion from one another is a paradigm shift when compared to centuries of theological concerns. Thus a de facto pluralism emerges, while upholding absolutist theological positions. The practical meaning of such a paradigm change is that truth is no longer the supreme value: it has been replaced by other values, such as peace, the human person, and care for the creation. While officially there is no relinquishing of the truth claims of a given religion, this strategy entails a practical willingness to attribute less importance to religious truth than was common in earlier centuries. This willingness and the concomitant preference of other moral and existential values are themselves a quiet religious revolution.

Yet a theology of world religions needs more than practical positions in response to reality. It must be articulated on the basis of reflection and principle. The practical attitude might accordingly be formulated as follows: unlike past understandings of religion as privileging metaphysical truths, a new understanding must be articulated that privileges other elements of the religious life. The contribution of religion to the formation of the individual person and to society is religion's ultimate test. Therefore, one should attach less weight to the conflicting truth claims of religions and consider essential those elements by means of which every religion makes a positive contribution to the shaping of people and society. This formulation does not renounce the truth claims underlying disagreements between religions. It does, however, neutralize them. The degree of conscious change and theological sacrifice that it calls for is minimal. From an epistemological perspective, one might see such

a position as an extension of Me'iri's. As indicated earlier, Me'iri was willing to overlook theological differences in favour of the big picture; that is, the recognition of a religion as valid because it accomplishes moral purposes and points to the same God. The specific theological truth claims of each religion are secondary.[39]

The axiological weakening of truth as the supreme value in shaping relations between religions does not of necessity lead to a relativistic view of truth. However, it is likely that psychologically and sociologically affording a less prominent place to truth in the scale of religious values might contribute to the adoption of a relativistic view of truth. This brings us to the second possibility, which touches upon issues of relativism, on the one hand, and the meaning of religious truth, on the other. The classical threat in the light of which other religions have been viewed is the threat to Judaism's continued existence. As we shall see, interreligious dialogue raises serious concerns among faithful Jews regarding conversion and the loss of religious identity that might ensue from dialogue. In addition, one may recognize another concern more intense in the contemporary era than in the era of religious competition. The modern and postmodern eras are characterized by the weakening of belief in absolute truth and the rise of the notion of relative truth.

Religious traditions have several possible responses to the threat of relativism. The first is a reaffirmation of the validity of truth, as understood throughout the generations. However, it seems that a certain devaluation of truth, classically understood, is inevitable in the new context. Catholic efforts to affirm classical truth-based and exclusivistic understandings, in the face of repeated devaluation, are a hallmark of Pope Benedict XVI's theology and they received a famous articulation in the 2000 document *Dominus Iesus*. These efforts are testimony both to the attempt to uphold classical understandings and to the erosion such understandings inevitably undergo. The relativistic understanding that, the authors of *Dominus Iesus* assume, some Catholic theologians had reached and against whom the document is composed, taken together with the difficult reception of the document in various Catholic theological circles, indicate how central the problem of relativism is to those engaged in a theology of other religions.

I want to suggest an alternative to the position that struggles to uphold classical understandings of absolute truth. The following move seeks to preserve the notion of truth, while refining it from within the conceptual world and terminology provided by the religion itself, in our case, Judaism. Unlike the

[39] This does not mean that 'truth' loses all religious significance. It is either accorded second place, following moral and spiritual criteria, or it is understood in other terms. One could point to a continuity between a biblical appeal to truth and an understanding of truth such as that which emerges from Me'iri's position.

challenge to absolute truth from outside religion, one may think of an internal relativization of truth. Most discussions of truth and falsehood assume a simple dichotomy between true and false. Consequently, religions may be classified as one or the other. Classically, 'we' have truth, or at least 'we' possess it fully, while 'they' have falsehood. A richer understanding of 'truth' suggests more nuanced ways of describing relations, while preserving the notion of truth. To do so, one must identify expressions of the internal relativization of the contents of religion. There are Jewish mechanisms and concepts that suggest that even core values should be understood as relative. For example, one midrashic tradition teaches that the Torah we possess is only the incomplete form of supernal wisdom.[40] According to this *midrash*, the Torah—probably Judaism's most central value—pales in comparison with the spiritual reality of wisdom that it seeks to represent. Rather than being fully identified with this wisdom, Torah remains a reflection of it, a lower level of what is in and of itself the absolute. Such relativization of wisdom allows us to see in the Torah something less than the theoretical alternative view that fully identifies the Torah we possess with supernal divine wisdom. The notion of truth is similarly relativized in various texts. Hierarchy is a way of relativizing, and a hierarchy of truths allows us to relativize the lowest level, identified with the truth as we understand and practise it. One teaching juxtaposes truth, language of truth, and ultimate truth, as three degrees or ways of conceptualizing truth.[41] Thus, truth and relative understandings of truth may be part of internal religious discourse, not only pressures brought to bear from the outside.

The question for consideration is to what extent one may adapt such internal applications of relativizing truth to the challenges coming from without, in particular to the challenges posed by the competing truth claims of different religions. Can we broaden the use of such internal relativizing language to include alternative religious systems? If so, we may construct what might be termed a hierarchical pluralism. Rather than identifying 'our' form of religion with absolute truth, we might ask where, within the hierarchy of truth, we might position our own religious system. Some might identify their religion with a higher rung on the ladder of truth, while conceding some dimension of truth, albeit on a lower rung, to another religion. Alternatively, all forms of religious expression might be considered on a lower rung, compared to a higher spiritual reality that transcends religious forms or their common perception and practice. Such an understanding has great potential in an interreligious context. Our religion may simultaneously possess a share of the absolute, as well as the relative, truth. Truth would not be seen as a point that one reaches,

[40] *Genesis Rabbah* 17: 5.

[41] See Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, 'Simhat torah: 1929' (Heb.), in id., *Likkutei Dibburim: An Anthology of Talks* (New York, 1992), i. 192. The original terms are *emet*, *sefat emet*, *emet la'amitah*.

but as a scale that one ascends and within which we recognize a hierarchy. All religions can share in the different positions within this hierarchy.

One cannot assume that internal mechanisms for reflecting upon truth can always be exported to a religion's views of other religions. Certain perspectives and certain flexibilities may be the prerogative of the internal spiritual discourse. Yet to the extent that spiritual literature conditions our view of religion, we can require it to extend beyond the boundaries of its normal application. If our theological challenge is how to deal with the consequences of applying the language of truth to our religious discourse, then identifying ways in which this very language has already been transmuted within tradition provides an important resource. Broadening the range of spiritual uses of religious terms allows us to approach other religions with a more spiritual vocabulary and world-view, thereby mitigating the competitive effects of the simple binary application of the language of truth in the religious sphere.

A third way of addressing the question of truth and falsehood is the most radical. It is the relinquishing of truth as an appropriate concept in religious discourse. This may be part of a broader relinquishing of philosophical language as suitable for describing religious life. At the very least, religious life is something else, something more than the correct philosophical–religious formulation of reality. Perhaps the very presentation of religion in terms of truth distorts something fundamental about religion. Such relinquishing may be motivated by additional considerations. In a Jewish context, we often encounter the claim that Judaism has neither theology nor dogma.[42] (Solomon Schechter is said to have quipped that Judaism's only dogma is that it lacks any.[43]) This means that Judaism does not place the same emphasis upon proper articulation of belief and sets of beliefs as other religions, particularly Christianity, do. In this sense, Judaism is much more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy. When we couple the ethnic component of the religion with the orthoprax guidance it offers its believers, Judaism's spiritual profile emerges as different from those religions that make correct formulation of belief the pillar of their faith. This emphasis on orthopraxy allows Jews to raise the question of the very relevance of truth to a definition of Judaism. While important forms of historical Judaism, particularly the philosophical,[44] relied heavily upon truth and creed, there are other earlier and, for some, more authentic forms of Judaism that did not. Therefore one of the issues facing a

[42] See e.g. Abraham Geiger, cited in translation in Alfred Jospe (ed.), *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship* (Detroit, 1981), 44.

[43] Despite the reputable scholarly standing of the authority from whom I have heard this *bon mot*, it is clearly belied by Schechter's essay 'The Dogmas of Judaism', in Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism: First Series* (Philadelphia, 1915), 147–81.

[44] See Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford, 1986).

Jewish theology of world religions is to what degree one should continue using religious–philosophical language rather than other languages. A return to a pre-philosophical religious language, as found in our pre-philosophical sources, is one option.

The difficulties posed by the philosophical casting of revelation as the revelation of truth may not be posed by earlier understandings of the moment of revelation, the Sinai event. The biblical understanding of Sinai is devoid of any relation to the concept of truth. Sinai is the moment of covenant making. The covenant is the religious framework that structures Israel's religious identity. Rather than being a category of abstract truth, covenant is a historical and relational category that provides meaning to Israel's particular story. Much like the covenant between the king and his people or between husband and wife, God makes a covenant with his people. At the heart of the covenant is the ordering of relations within the relational framework that the covenant provides. Understanding Judaism generally, and the Sinai revelation in particular, in terms of covenant places a specific relationship within a particular story at the heart of a religious world-view and at the heart of a specific revelation. All this is very different from viewing Sinai in abstract truth terms.

A return to a relational understanding as constitutive of religious identity may have far-reaching ramifications for Judaism's relationship with other religions. A relational understanding does not assume the same exclusiveness that a philosophical view of truth and falsehood does. Just as a covenant within human relations does not assume that other parallel covenants and relationships cannot exist (for example, between other couples), so the religious covenant does not, in principle, rule out the possibility of the existence of other covenants.[45]

Describing the religious life in relational terms has much to commend it from another perspective. Our understanding of religious life draws analogies and finds similarities with other areas of life. If we see the religious life in

[45] This is a point repeatedly made by David Hartman in his own theology of other religions. While I consider this an important strategy, we ought to also be aware of how dicey the analogy is. Human covenants recognize many partners all fulfilling the same role in their own marriages. Applying the analogy to the human–divine relationship would assume multiple gods fulfilling the same covenantal role in relation to others as the God of Israel does in relation to his people. Such an understanding may indeed be found in several biblical passages (e.g. Gen. 31: 53; Judg. 11: 24). This raises the challenging question of whether covenantal theology must be non-monotheistic. The possibility of multiple relations with the same God already assumes a notion of one true God to whom all turn. It is thus already a philosophical, or conceptual, view that transforms the simple understanding of covenant. The biblical metaphors also break down at this point, as they can no longer describe such a reality, which may have been outside the purview of the religious imagination that initially expressed itself through the notion of covenant. It does remain, however, a serious theological option, even if it has in some ways gone beyond the original biblical framework.

cognitive and philosophical terms, highlighting notions of truth and falsehood, our encounter with the religious Other will be governed by the penetrating gaze that seeks to discern truth from falsehood. Our entire attitude to the religious field will be derived from this abstract view. The same is true for the proposal to understand the religious life in terms analogous to human relationships. Once we describe Israel's relationship with God in terms of human relationships, the fundamental question becomes, 'To what extent might one describe relationships between religions in terms that are taken from interpersonal relationships?' Drawing this analogy has more far-reaching consequences than our ability to justify other religions as valid alternative relationships.

There are moral consequences to presenting relationships between religions in analogy to human relationships. There is often a serious gap between the teachings of religions regarding the path of moral perfection in interpersonal relationships and their teachings regarding relationships between religions. All religions have developed moral teachings that emphasize the spiritual and moral perfection of the individual in relation to other individuals. To the extent that we are prepared to take seriously the analogy between religious and human relationships, there follows a series of consequences that touches upon how believers of different religions will be asked to treat each other. Humility, readiness to learn from the other, openness, love of the other—spiritual conclusions that grow out of a principled pluralistic understanding—are some possible applications of seeing relations between religions as similar to ordinary human relations. One wonders: 'Could it be that in the same way that no single person can bring to perfection all the talents and human potentialities, so it is with the world's religions?' 'Does the multiplicity of religious forms reflect an inherent spiritual need, much as does the multiplicity of human beings?' Much thought still awaits us along these lines. That Judaism's theological roots are in the covenant and therefore in the framework of personal relationships with God allows us naturally to develop such a Jewish religious view.

Let us put the matter differently: Judaism is a religion and a way of life for a particular people. This may create certain difficulties for dialogue, but it also opens up possibilities for creativity and flexibility in the Jewish theology of other religions. A practical consequence of whether the national or the religious pole of Jewish identity is emphasized is the question of universal conversion to Judaism. Emphasizing the religious component alone leads to highlighting Judaism's message to the world in terms of truth, a truth that should speak to all. Cast in these terms the conclusion is inevitable: Judaism's superiority as a system of truth mandates spreading its message to humanity and, at the very least, a generous opening of the doors to converts. Conversely,

emphasizing the national component highlights the interest in a people's specific story and its particular relationship with God. As suggested, this emphasis neutralizes the missionary drive that is derived from the principle of truth. Whoever defines Judaism in terms of truth must account for why he refrains from acting in kindness towards the rest of humanity and sharing with them the finest that can be shared—the ultimate truth. Is it not inconceivable that the Creator of all would limit perfect truth to a narrow group and not seek to share his good truth with the entirety of humanity? The complexity of Jewish attitudes over the generations towards the spreading of Judaism to others is a window onto the complexity of Jewish self-understanding. Emphasizing the national pole in Jewish identity provides profound justification for neutralizing the missionary drive. Thus, conceptualizing religion in relational terms brings forth a less exclusivist understanding of religion that can better contain the Other within its world-view.

The emphasis upon relationship does not detract from the meaning of revelation. On the contrary, were it not for revelation, one could not describe the special relationship between God and his people. It is precisely the making of the covenant at Sinai that is inseparable from revelation and that creates the special relationship between God and Israel. Understanding revelation as constituting a people rather than as revealing a truth enables openness to the Other, as long as such openness does not affect the faithfulness mandated by the covenant. It is precisely the understanding of revelation in terms of such a creation that enables mutual openness and recognition. If there is something exclusivist in revelation that creates a boundary between those who received the revelation and those who did not, creation is always the pole of religious thought that emphasizes that which unites, because we are all creatures. The unifying potential of creation is relevant not only in relation to the universal creation from which all the variety of humanity later evolved, but also in relation to understanding Israel's status in terms of creation. To think of creation is to think of what it means to be created and to recall the Creator. In the final analysis, we are all created in some way or another, constituted by God in accordance with his will. If the moment of revelation casts Jews as being created for a unique role, we do not thereby lose relation with other creatures. On the contrary, we share with them the fundamental fact that all that we are is itself a creation of God. The different expressions of creation may thus engage each other, even as creatures interact with each other. To be created is to be in dialogue with other parts of creation. Revelation thus establishes the framework from which we engage others in a dialogue of being, rather than limiting our interest in others as sole possessors of truth.

Emphasizing relationship rather than truth as the focus of religious life leads us to place faithfulness as the supreme value. Our religious duty is not to deny

the value and validity of other religions. Rather, it is to be faithful to the covenantal relationship to which we belong, much as a spouse's responsibility is to be faithful to his or her partner, rather than to deny the fundamental legitimacy of all other couples. The development of such a religious world-view leads us back to the biblical roots of our faith. These include prophecies concerning the relation between world religions. It is worth considering the following prophecy of Micah in the present context:

> In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' . . . For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.[46]

Two seemingly contradictory ideals are articulated here. On the one hand we find the nations coming to the mountain of the Lord's house, to learn God's ways. On the other we find the affirmation that ideally all nations are to follow their own gods, while Israel follows God. How, then, can one reconcile the pluralistic view of multiple relations coexisting with the prophecy that acknowledges something unique that Israel has to share with the rest of humanity? Instead of resolving this paradox, I would like to present it as a hermeneutical and theological challenge that captures the complex situation that a Jewish theology of world religions now faces. The challenge of the passage is still greater when we consider the eschatological perspective that it offers and pose the question of whether both perspectives in this text can be carried through from present time to the ideal future time.

I would like now to draw together the insights already mentioned with some new ones in order to revisit an issue fundamental to the relevance and meaning of other religions. I have argued for an understanding of revelation in relational terms. This understanding allows us to downplay truth claims as fundamental to an understanding of religion, while at the same time permitting learning and receiving inspiration from other religions, in much the same way as these are considered normal and constitutive features of human relationships. Nevertheless, extending the paradigm of human relationships to relationships between religions requires more than simply modelling the one on the other. For such a move to make sense in a Jewish theological framework, it must be supported by additional arguments. Belief in revelation must be shown to be compatible with openness to other religions. There are several strategies by means of which belief in revelation can be reconciled with the openness that permits genuine exchange, sharing, and learning from others.

[46] Mic. 4: 1–5.

The possibility of multiple revelations. The most far-reaching theoretical possibility is that revelation is not exclusive. In principle, multiple revelations could take place alongside one another. This possibility is particularly relevant if we emphasize the relational element in the construction of identity, since one relationship does not exclude another. Yet even if truth and falsehood continue to occupy prominent places in our religious self-understanding, the recognition that we were given a revelation does not in and of itself preclude the possibility that other revelations may have been shared with other groups or religious communities. Rabbi Nethanael ibn al-Fayyumi, a twelfth-century Yemenite Jewish mystic who may have influenced Maimonides,[47] entertained this idea in the context of Jewish thought. Despite this particular precedent, the idea was not raised often. The primary reason for this is that the contents of other revelations seemed false to Jews throughout history, and thus they did not attempt to harmonize them. Accepting this position must be accompanied by acknowledging how little it has served in the past and by defining the boundaries within which it could be applied.

Revelation and its existential impact. We have already mentioned that the philosophers of the Middle Ages understood particular religious revelations against the background of a broader philosophical understanding. This background could theoretically lend itself to multiple revelations, all of which would be understood in light of the common philosophical world-view. Given that today's science and philosophy lack such a common world-view, this specific strategy cannot be implemented. We may, nevertheless, still be able to consider revelation in the light of a universal criterion that can serve as a testing ground for revelation and its consequences. As noted, modern understandings of religion place more emphasis on the contribution of religion to the life of the individual and of society and less on the meaning of truths in and of themselves. How religions work and the influence they have are thus significant criteria for their evaluation. These criteria are relevant to teaching and preaching. How religions 'sell' themselves is largely based on their contribution to the lives of their believers. These criteria take us from the realm of the philosophical and into the fields of behavioural and social sciences. Can they provide a common testing ground in reality for the spiritual life of religions in their diversity? If so, one could consider the influence of religions on the lives of their believers. Their moral, spiritual, psychological, educational, and mystical lives are areas worthy of examination when studying the effects and value of diverse religious traditions. If different religions end up doing the same thing for their believers, we have here an opening for dialogue and

[47] Nethanael ibn al-Fayyumi, *Bustan al-Ukul*, Judaeo-Arabic text and English translation, ed. D. Levine (New York, 1908), 108; see also Paul Fenton in Chapter 10, below.

mutual understanding.[48] Such a common basis could neutralize the engagement in the speculative and metaphysical dimensions that tend to distinguish religions and highlight the similarity of their contribution to believers' lives. According to this suggestion, revelation has less to do with the abstract truths revealed than with how it manifests itself in the lives of believers. Multiple revelations can thus be recognized according to the fruits they bear in the lives of their believers.

Revelation and creation. Placing an emphasis upon creation allows for greater commonality and openness between creatures. Creation is one whole. In highlighting difference we ignore the common foundation of creation and prefer alternative conceptual foundations, such as election or the exclusivist understanding of revelation. The conceptual foundation of creation allows us, in principle, greater openness and receptivity to others and even to what they may have to teach us. The notion of the image of God may be central in this context. If humans are made in the image of God, there is a spiritual basis for integrating and providing religious meaning to a wide range of human thought and creativity. This could also include religious speculation and the discovery of ways by which humans have come close to God. Jewish thought has, on the whole, made little use of this concept compared to the emphasis upon Israel's particularity.[49] One of the reasons for the qualified use of the concept is precisely the tension between its universal potential and the national emphasis prominent in many Jewish theological world-views throughout the centuries. A rediscovery of the conceptual potential of the image of God and creation might provide a fruitful direction for Jewish reflection upon world religions. Accordingly, other religions may be viewed as expressions of the fulfilment of human potential. Recognizing the full potential of humans made in the image of God can provide a counterpoint to the emphasis commonly placed upon revelation and allow us to recognize the traces of the divine within human reality, including and maybe especially its religious and spiritual expressions.

It is interesting in this context to consider the position of the holy person, the saint, in world religions. The holy person constitutes a test for the effectiveness of the religious system as well as a symbol of the perfection to which it can lead. The ability of religions to produce holy men and women should be a fundamental criterion in the light of which we consider those religions. Such

[48] This was powerfully argued in Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together* (New York, 2010).

[49] See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature', *Harvard Theological Review*, 87 (1994), 171–95. This overall assessment contrasts with that of Yair Lorberbaum, *The Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* [Tselem elohim: halakhah ve'agadah] (Jerusalem, 2004).

holiness includes moral perfection as well as a broad range of supernatural phenomena associated with saints, particularly the depth, power, and efficacy of their prayers. The kind of insularity characterizing Jewish attitudes to other religions is accompanied by ignoring or interpreting away expressions of spiritual excellence in those traditions. When we examine the criteria by which a saint is recognized in different religions, we see that those criteria are strikingly similar, even as differences typical of the religions are also expressed in their respective ideals. Should not some degree of legitimacy and recognition be conferred upon a religion that produces saintly expressions of human spiritual excellence, even if thereby we do not validate the entire religious system? The phenomenon of saints presents a serious challenge to a theology of religions. In some way the saint is himself or herself a revelation, a channel for revealing the divine in the world. This channel of revelation is an alternative to the classical channels of revelation upon which the great traditions are founded, and as such it must lead to some recognition of the other tradition.

Torah and wisdom. One of the ways in which Jewish tradition has justified learning from the world outside revelation is through the distinction between Torah and wisdom. As the Midrash states, 'if one tells you there is wisdom among the gentiles—believe him'.[50] According to this distinction, it is permissible to learn wisdom from outside, but not Torah. Of course, this distinction describes what learning means to us, rather than the self-understanding of the one from whom we learn. It may be that one man's Torah (or revelation) is another man's wisdom. Thus we can consider multiple levels of significance in relation to the teachings of a given religion. Accepting the legitimacy of multiple perspectives may facilitate interreligious conversation.

One possible understanding of 'wisdom' is moral wisdom, in contradistinction to divine revelation. According to this understanding, one can distinguish between the religious field, which touches upon the divine and our relation to it, and the moral field, which is particular to wisdom. Moral wisdom is the arena most appropriate for the encounter between different religions and the field that provides legitimacy for other religions.[51]

Considering the categories of wisdom and Torah in and of themselves makes us realize that the distinction between Torah and wisdom is not as clear-cut as it appears. In the case of Jewish Scripture, the wisdom in the third part of the tripartite Hebrew Bible is considered to be part of revelation, even if the mechanism through which this revelation came about is of a lower order.[52]

[50] *Lamentations Rabbah* 2: 13.

[51] This understanding could find support in the reading of Me'iri that highlights morality as the criterion for legitimacy of religions.

[52] See Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, Conn., 1976), 169–70 nn. 293–4.

Moreover, the words of wisdom of the sages of the Oral Torah are simultaneously recognized as wisdom and as an expression of revelation. The sages did not simply pass on the Oral Torah handed down at Sinai. They actually created it through their interpretative efforts and their own wisdom. Therefore, the boundary between wisdom and revelation is not as sharp as we may have thought. Accordingly, the precedent of sages who provide through their own minds and consciousnesses an expression for continuing revelation may even provide a precedent for the appreciation of sages from other religious traditions. Can they too not reveal the divine through their own expressions of wisdom, even without the express and visible revelation of God in ways as dramatic as the revelation of the Torah at Sinai?

Restoring lost revelation. A unique strategy for addressing the issue of revelation in relation to other religions was mentioned above in relation to Abraham Maimonides. One cannot dissociate the historical revelation particular to Israel from the particular history that ensues from that revelation. Receiving revelation and remaining faithful to it are not one and the same. In principle, it is possible that revelation was received but lost or became otherwise impaired, and the gap created thereby may be filled by other religions. Other religions may have received their own autonomous revelations or may have drawn from our own original revelation. One way or another, encounter with other religions can appeal to the image of an ideal revelation, as distinct from the concrete historical expression of Judaism as we know it. Thus, Abraham Maimonides considers all perfection to have been contained in our ideal revelation, even while its actual contents may need to be recovered from those who learned from us what we over time forgot. This strategy permits us to relate to a concrete historical religious Other, including its positive and edifying expressions, without detracting from revelation remembered in its ideal perfection. The attitude expressed here is one of profound humility. Willingness to learn from another religious tradition not only expresses the fundamental humility that is part and parcel of true religious life, but more particularly it humbly acknowledges the historical circumstances particular to the Jewish people, including their sin and its consequences. Abraham Maimonides developed a spiritual attitude that contains a kind of pluralistic depth—one that may be termed historical pluralism and that is distinct from the more common metaphysical pluralism.

SAFEGUARDING JEWISH IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY IN THE FACE OF WORLD RELIGIONS

Concern for Jewish continuity and identity is not a philosophical problem. It is a religious problem, inasmuch as Israel's identity, nationhood, and continuity are all seen as part of the covenant and, hence, as primary components of Judaism and Jewish life. Dealing with this concern is therefore less a matter of philosophical speculation and more a matter of psychological and educational sensitivity. The experience of thousands of years of competition with other religions, including religious persecution and the threat of conversion by force or social circumstances, has created in Jews a great suspicion of other religions. This attitude is responsible for the erection of barriers to protect Judaism from the harmful influences that contact with other religions might have. Many Jews feel that such barriers help maintain Jewish identity, preserving its integrity and the continuity of Jewish life. Concern for Jewish continuity has only intensified in the modern and postmodern periods. To a large extent, it defines the agenda of public Jewish life. Yet it is precisely the changed circumstances in which Jews tackle the problem that raise the question of whether upholding attitudinal barriers to other religions is today part of the problem or part of the solution. Do the attitudinal barriers provide walls of protection, or have the sheep already leaped over the fence, leaving only the shepherds of old within its confines?

I would like to explore the possibility that controlled openness to other religions, when practised by mature and well-informed members of the Jewish community, may not only not weaken Jewish identity, but might actually enhance it. I make the argument in three ways.

The first has to do with the community one serves and how to reach it. The protective tendency is characteristic of certain communities within the Jewish world, particularly the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox. Other Jews already have various encounters with other religions and their members. Increasingly, members of the Orthodox world, especially young Israelis, have gone beyond the boundaries of their tradition's previous encounters with other traditions. This is true of the broad turning to the East, but not exclusive to it. Sizeable sectors of the Jewish community are seeking an authentic Jewish life that is not defined by the walls erected to keep out other groups. A Jewish theology of world religions that does not enshrine boundaries as the hallmark of a Jewish approach to other religions will attract large sectors of Jewish society. One who reflects positively and constructively on other religions will gain access to the hearts and minds of Jews who have been fascinated by or drawn to them.

There is a more principled way of arguing the case. Strengthening identity by maintaining boundaries is to resort to an extreme form of negative

identity formation. In other words, I am myself because I am different from you. Upholding that difference reinforces identity. In this instance, the difference is upheld by maintaining boundaries that preclude any sharing of common religious ground, thereby reinforcing the sense of otherness. I have seen time and again how other religions have become straw men in the religious imagination of educators. They imagine other religions as certain stereotypes, against which Judaism is judged superior. The argument for Judaism's superiority, hence for the loyalty of the student, is made by characterizing the other religion—most often Christianity—facilely and ignoring nuance, development, and the real spiritual lives of that religion's believers.

Engagement with other religions serves as an antidote to such conventional practices in one of two ways. First, the imagined differences give way to real differences, thereby bringing into relief who the two partners in the dialogue really are and what might justify their continuing differences. Living with an imaginary Other can be the source of a future crisis, when we discover the Other in his or her reality. Recognizing real differences is more respectful to one's own self and to the actual Other. But there is a far more significant consequence of encounter with the real, rather than the imaginary, Other. It forces us to articulate positively why we are what we are, rather than as just different from the imaginary Other. In terms of identity formation, it is far superior to base one's Jewish identity on positive grounds than to justify one's Jewish existence as being unlike others. Of course, positive identity formation does not require the presence of an Other. However, the encounter with the Other does force us to deepen our own understanding of Jewish religious identity, thereby shifting it from negative to positive grounds. According to this line of reasoning, openness to the Other can point the way to healthier and more meaningful identity building.

The third argument is based on experience and reinforces the previous suggestions. I offer it as a testimony that has grown out of over a decade of organizing interreligious educational programmes, geared towards religious leaders, future religious leaders, and other educated representatives of religions. I discovered early on that the effect of encountering a religious Other is not the weakening of one's identity, but the contrary, its strengthening. Time and again I have found that students did not feel threatened by an encounter with members of other religions but rather felt called upon to deepen their own religious lives and discover depths in them that were previously unknown to them. While the opposite effect obviously remains a theoretical possibility, the reality has consistently not been that feared for generations. To a large extent, this seems built into the dynamics of contemporary interreligious encounter, which are fundamentally different from those that governed the encounter in earlier periods. Thus on the theoretical level and the experiential level as well,

we find interreligious encounter inspiring and strengthening identity, not weakening it.

This testimony brings us back to the question of religious truth and its centrality, or otherwise, to religious identity. I am sure that someone who is reinforced in his or her religious belief through relationship with a member of another religion has not, through that encounter, discovered that his or her religion is truer than previously thought. Encounter exposes one to deeper existential and experiential dimensions of what it means to be religious. Experience and encounter enliven our faith, rather than reinforcing our truth claims. An exchange of faith is not a debate about what is true. It is carried out in a different relational framework and with different aims. The fruit of the encounter is appreciating faith in the life of the believer, rather than faith as a set of religious affirmations and beliefs demanding recognition as being more true than those of the other. Ultimately, truth and falsehood are not where the most important spiritual movements take place. The realm of faith, while related to the cognitive dimension of truth, draws on deeper and more complex dimensions in the human person. These are awakened in the interreligious encounter at its best. Interreligious dialogue thus understood is more a dialogue of the faithful than a dialogue about faith and its veracity. This is why, in my view, the benefits to religious identity emerging from it far outweigh the potential harm to identity that it might bring about.

Encounter with another faith is just that, encounter. It is not a competition of ideas or a philosophical debate. Because it is an encounter, it involves those dimensions of the person that are affected through encounter. It touches emotions as much as ideas. Indeed, opposition to it often draws on emotional patterns that have long informed Jewish attitudes to other religions. These emotional patterns cannot be parried effectively by arguments or testimonies about the positive benefits of encounter and why it does not constitute a threat to identity. Dealing with these emotional charges is a work unto itself. It involves studying and understanding the changes that have occurred and continue to occur in other religions, primarily Christianity, in relation to Judaism. Like any human relationship it requires healing, understanding, and forgiveness. Religious identity built over and against the identity of the Other is an identity built on pain and its enduring memory. Negativity and pain are often building blocks of Jewish identity, while healing of memory is one possible outcome of true encounter. This healing paves the way to the construction of Jewish identity on firmer, more spiritual grounds than those of painful memory and the walls of separation they have built. Instead I argue that if we are to be successful in our attempt to construct Jewish identity in a way that will ensure Jewish continuity, we need to discover identity grounded in the spiritual uniqueness of Israel's vocation. The way to such discovery includes dealing

with and going beyond those forms of identity construction that have made suffering, difference, and competition the cornerstones of Jewish identity.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A JEWISH THEOLOGY OF WORLD RELIGIONS AND DISCOVERING OUR OWN IDENTITY

This chapter has examined the development of a contemporary Jewish theology of world religions in broad strokes, raising core issues and suggesting basic strategies. Implicit throughout is the idea that both historically and theoretically there is a wealth of precedents, options, and possibilities from which Jews can choose and in light of which a Jewish theology of religions—ultimately Judaism's own theology—must be carried out. This multiplicity of options exists diachronically, throughout Jewish history, and synchronically, in the many positions that exist in our times, as in others. We are thus called to choose.

Our choice is not simply one of how to act on a day-to-day basis. Properly speaking, day-to-day questions belong to the realm of tolerance, to the social and political realm of coexistence. A theology of religions makes us think what deeper acceptance and recognition of the Other might mean. One consequence of genuine acceptance is the willingness to learn from the Other and recognize expressions of spiritual reality in one's life that can provide inspiration also to those beyond the Other's religion. Our choice thus touches upon fundamental theological and spiritual matters. Its implications are broader than the development of an appropriate attitude to other religions.

The key questions of our discussion touch upon the most fundamental ways that we understand Judaism. The tension between the national and the religious dimensions of Judaism comes up repeatedly as a defining issue in a theology of world religions. There are different emphases on how inward Judaism is, a path guiding a particular people along its historical journey, or how broad it is in its vision, providing meaning for humanity, setting its proper sights, and establishing its eschatological hopes. Our own view of other religions is a function of how we view Judaism and how we view our place in history. We are thus challenged to an authentic and unbiased assessment of our own spiritual standing. The challenge of a Jewish theology of world religions is thus an internal theological challenge, no less than a challenge presented by contemporary history and circumstances. Because it is, above all, an internal spiritual challenge, we must undertake the task with utmost seriousness. Seen this way, the theological challenge at hand is a key to the theological and spiritual regeneration that we so badly need.