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and

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Rethinking Christianity
Rabbinic Positions and Possibilities

EUGENE KORN

INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE most pervasive conditions of modern life is empirical pluralism. Social, cultural, and religious diversities pursue us relentlessly today. The Emancipation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries moved most Western Jews out of their insulated ghettos, granted them citizenship, and welcomed their participation in their mainstream national cultures, thus inevitably increasing their contact with their non-Jewish neighbours. In Europe and America, this meant closer, more harmonious, and more frequent interaction with Christians and Christianity. Even Jewish statehood, born out of the deep desire to free the Jewish people from subordination to non-Jews, willy-nilly has brought about unprecedented requirements for Jewish interaction with Christians and Christianity. Israel now assumes sovereign responsibility for the welfare and rights of more than 140,000 individual Christian citizens as well as numerous churches. And as the visits to Israel of Popes John Paul II in 2000 and Benedict XVI in 2009 have demonstrated, Israelis now must interact with Church officials to find respectful relations and common ground. This is true not only in the realm of realpolitik, but also in the religious domain, as the Chief Rabbinate meets regularly with high-level Vatican and Protestant clergy from abroad to discuss issues of mutual spiritual and practical concern.

Of course Jews and Christians met in medieval times also, but modernity saturates us with pluralistic interaction of a frequency, intensity, and quality not experienced in the past. The contemporary forces for social diversity are inescapable, and avoiding the religious other is impossible for a modern Jew—of any stripe.

The European Enlightenment created a vast secular space for the citizens of the new world. Since the French Revolution Jews and Christians have been meeting, speaking, and co-operating with each other in the offices of their professions, the corridors of government, the lecture halls of universities, and the

public areas of their cities primarily as fraternal secularists. They have been pluralists who all too often were willing to trade their religious identities for the dream of social equality and mutual dignity. 'Be a Jew in the home and a man on the street' became the watchword for many Enlightenment Jews. From then until today, even when they met qua Jews and Christians, religion was often left behind. There is more than a little truth to the quip that the founding American members of the National Conference of Christians and Jews were Christians who did not believe in Christianity and Jews who did not believe in Judaism. Needless to say, they agreed on much.

None of this bargain with modern secular life can work for Jewish theology or religious Jews who seek to fashion their life experience into a holistic and coherent world-view. Here there is no secular space or naked public square, no experience devoid of religious meaning or human relationship unshaped by their Jewish values and halakhic world-views. In the words of the pre-eminent twentieth-century Orthodox philosopher Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 'God claims the whole, not a part of man, and whatever He established as an order within the scheme of creation is sacred.'¹ If so, a contemporary Jewish theology needs to formulate a coherent and sober understanding of Christianity and Christian belief today. What do Jewish thought or theologically oriented Jews make of their Christian neighbours and colleagues, particularly the pious among them who no longer seek to undermine Judaism or the Jewish people? Can Jews see the image of God in the face of a believing Christian? And can Jewish theology understand contemporary Christianity as a positive religious and spiritual phenomenon? Are there halakhic and religious grounds for appreciating contemporary Christianity and its current teachings?

Since religion has surged back to the forefront of contemporary culture and politics, investigating the possibility of relating to non-Jews *on religious grounds* assumes added significance for Jews who are unapologetic about appreciating

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 'Confrontation', *Tradition*, 6/2 (1964), 24 n. 8. Soloveitchik also emphasized this in 1971 in a conversation with Cardinal Johannes Willebrands: 'All dialogue between Jews and Christians cannot but be religious and theological . . . Can we speak otherwise than on the level of religion? Our culture is certainly a religious one' (*International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee: Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue 1970-1985* (Vatican City, 1988), 273). Yet even Soloveitchik may have briefly fallen into the cultural trap of advocating meeting others on secular grounds. In 'Confrontation', which explored the correct parameters of Jewish-Christian dialogue, he initially advocated interfaith co-operation in 'secular orders'. Realizing this language was problematic, he qualified it as 'popular semantics' (ibid.) and soon thereafter in the Rabbinical Council of America Record for February 1966 he formulated the following statement: 'Rabbis and Christian clergymen cannot discuss socio-cultural and moral problems as sociologists, historians or cultural ethicists in agnostic or secularist categories. As men of God, our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and terminology bear the imprint of a religious world outlook.' For an analysis of 'Confrontation' and Soloveitchik's arguments relating to interfaith activity, see Eugene Korn, 'The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting "Confrontation"', *Modern Judaism*, 25 (2005), 290-315.

the pluralism and blessings of modern life, and who look to Jewish tradition, thought, and halakhah to shape their attitudes and experiences. A mature Jewish theology need not feel defensive about such an enquiry. Moreover, many Christians are now actively seeking to enhance their own identity through deepening their understanding of Judaism and theological reconciliation with the Jewish people and their faith. Thus for a variety of spiritual and empirical reasons, developing an understanding of contemporary Christians and Christianity remains a compelling post-Emancipation challenge, for both contemporary Judaism as well as for Jews who search for God in every corner of their experience and are committed to an integrated spiritual *Weltanschauung*.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

We should bear in mind a number of points regarding a contemporary analysis of Christians and Christianity. First, Jewish consideration of Christianity today is theologically and halakhically different from the issues that faced Jewish authorities at the time of Jesus and the first century of the Common Era. This is due to the fundamental theological break that occurred among Jewish Christians sometime after the death of Jesus. During this period a new belief arose that the teachings of Jesus no longer fitted into mainstream Judaism as then practised. Instead, the later thinking claimed that belief in Jesus *replaced* obedience to the commandments of the Torah (*mitsvot*) as the way to reach God, thus rendering the Jewish covenant (*berit*) no longer valid.² Belief in Jesus was alleged to reflect a new, more mature covenant and constituted a different religious testimony pointing to a different revelation and path to salvation. With this development, Christian belief ceased being a tolerable deviance within the Jewish community and became an intolerable heresy for Judaism and its rabbinical authorities. Bitter feuds broke out, and Jewish Christians became *minim*, sectarian apostates to be excluded from the Jewish community.³ At that point the two communities began to part ways and develop independent calendars, *sancta*, traditions, and theologies.

Yet something else occurred that simultaneously mitigated the strains. When Saul of Tarsus exported Christianity to the non-Jews of the Roman

² This teaching later became known as 'supersessionism'. While traditional scholarship and teachings maintained that Paul introduced this nullification of the Jewish law for Jews, much recent scholarship claims that Paul advocated that Jews continue to observe the *mitsvot* and only non-Jews did not need the commandments for salvation (see Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven, 1992); E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London, 1977); James D. J. Dunn, *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2001); Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia, 1976)).

³ See James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (London, 1934), chs. 1–3; Lawrence Shiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakbic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism* (Hoboken, NJ, 1985), ch. 7.

empire, he transformed the disagreement from an internal Jewish argument into an external one. Christianity then ceased being primarily a heretical strain of Judaism and became an independent non-Jewish religion. Later, the conversion of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century formally established Christianity and its doctrines as a different religion from Judaism, one predominantly for non-Jews. Theoretically, this made it easier for Jews to reconsider Christianity, since according to the Jewish law confronting Jewish heresy is different from evaluating non-Jewish religions. After the separation, the crucial Jewish question changed from 'How shall we deal with heresy?' to 'How should Judaism regard non-Jewish Christians and their religion?'

Second, in our time most Christian churches have changed their official teachings about Jews and Judaism. Since the Second Vatican Council convened in 1962, Catholic and Protestant thinkers have generated a robust literature of new Christian theology towards Judaism and the Jewish people. The genesis of this transformation was the Holocaust and its near-successful Final Solution for the Jews in Europe. For Jews, the Holocaust was a searing physical tragedy from which the Jewish people is still recovering; for Christians, the Holocaust caused a deep theological and moral trauma. Something in Christendom had gone undeniably wrong and Christian thinkers recoiled from what had been wrought. Reflection on this unimaginable evil that took root so easily in the heart of Christian culture was the impetus for Christians to reappraise their tortured history and theology regarding Jews. Over the past forty-five years this reassessment process has spawned a discussion no less remarkable for its content than for its quantity. One Catholic theologian succinctly dubbed the transformation of contemporary Christian thinking as 'the six Rs': (1) the repudiation of antisemitism, (2) the rejection of the charge of deicide, (3) repentance for the Holocaust, (4) recognition of the State of Israel, (5), the review of teaching about Jews and Judaism, and (6) rethinking the proselytization of Jews.⁴ Judged in the light of traditional Christian teachings, most Christian theologies have undergone a revolution with respect to their spiritual and historical Jewish patrimony. The Second Vatican Council's proclamation, *Nostra aetate*,⁵ in 1965 proved to be a point of departure for a Christian journey from which there has been no return.⁶

⁴ Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?* (New York, 2000), 248; see also pp. 247–66. A more detailed description of the major changes in Christian theology related to Jews and Judaism is provided in the final section of this chapter.

⁵ The text of *Nostra aetate* can be found at <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=2552>>.

⁶ Two contrasting events dramatically indicate this change in Christian attitude to Jews and Judaism. Before the First Zionist Congress in 1897, an article appeared in the official Vatican periodical *Civiltà cattolica* explaining that Jews are required to live as servants in exile until the end of days, a fate which can be avoided only by conversion to Christianity. So when Theodor

This profound transformation in Christianity opens up new possibilities for a fresh contemporary Jewish theological approach to Christianity and has had a dramatic salutary effect in the last forty-five years on how Jews can relate on an experiential level to religious Christians. This is possible because neither normative Jewish law nor Jewish theology nor Jewish attitudes to Christians and their faith are wholly dogmatic or theoretical. Throughout history they have been influenced by what Christian doctrine says about Judaism and Jews and, perhaps more significantly, how Christians related to Jews in the economic, social, and political conditions of different eras. In short, Jewish theology about Christianity is partially rooted in the different experiences of the Jewish people with the Church.

Third, while the Written Torah generally paints a negative picture of non-Jewish nations,⁷ it portrays the non-native stranger in Jewish society (the *ger*) as a positive but isolated figure. The talmudic rabbis expanded on the idea of the stranger and conceptualized it into a broad legal and moral category, demanding that Jews protect people in this category and relate to them with moral responsibility.⁸ It came to include all non-Jews who accept the basic values of morality, known as the seven Noahide commandments: the six prohibitions on murder, theft, sexual immorality, idolatry, eating the limb of a live animal (a paradigm for cruelty and devaluation of life), and blasphemy against the single God of the universe, as well as the one positive injunction to set up courts of law that justly enforce these six prohibitions. All non-Jews who follow these basic laws of civilization are considered to be worthy *benei no'ah*.⁹ Thus the talmudic tradition split the non-Jewish world into two sub-categories: the immoral heathen, practising an illicit and intolerable religion, and the positively regarded Noahide,¹⁰ whom Jews are obligated to protect and sustain.

Herzl approached Pius X in 1904 to enlist his support for Jewish return to Zion, the pope declined: 'It is not in our power to prevent you from going to Jerusalem, but we will never give our support. As the head of the Church, I cannot give you any other answer. The Jews do not recognize our Lord, hence we cannot recognize the Jewish people. When you come to Palestine, we will be there to baptize all of you' (*The Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, ed. Marvin Lowenthal (London, 1956), 429–30). In March 2000 Pope John Paul II made an official visit to Israel, met the president and chief rabbis, and prayed at Jerusalem's Western Wall for the welfare of the Jewish people as his elder brothers who remained the people of God's covenant.

⁷ In Genesis, the non-Jews are immoral pagans with whom the patriarchs interact. In Exodus, they are the brutal Egyptians and Amalekites. In Leviticus, those who engage in abominable practices. In Deuteronomy, the seven idolatrous Canaanite nations. On this point see Ruth Langer in Chapter 7, above.

⁸ Tosefta *AZ* 8: 4; Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Kings', 9: 1.

⁹ Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Kings', 8: 10.

¹⁰ The term *benei no'ah* or 'Noahide' is used in rabbinic literature in two different senses. Technically, all non-Jews are Noahides and stand under the seven Noahide commandments,

This revolutionized the biblical view of humanity from a largely binary one of Jews and evil non-Jews into a tripartite conceptualization of Jews, worthy non-Jews, and heathens.

Thus Judaism has long subscribed to what is now called a double covenant theology: Jews stand obligated as partners with God in one divine covenant containing 613 commandments, while non-Jews stand under the divine covenant of the seven Noahide commandments. Importantly, each covenant is valid for its respective adherents and there is no compelling theological or moral need for Noahides to convert and enter into the Jewish covenant. Noahides participate in an independently authentic covenant that prescribes a separate, valid, and religiously valuable way of life. In rabbinic tradition, they are accorded positive status—even to the extent that non-Jews who faithfully keep the Noahide commandments are regarded by God as more beloved than Jews who violate the fundamentals of their covenant of 613 commandments.¹¹ Rabbinic tradition paid some of these non-Jews the ultimate theological compliment by teaching that ‘righteous non-Jews have a share in the world to come’.¹²

The last point is significant and presents a critically important theological asymmetry with traditional Christian teaching. As indicated, rabbinic Judaism taught that the Jewish covenant was not the sole valid religion or path to salvation. Judaism possesses a natural theological openness that flows from this double covenant theory. A non-Jew need not believe in Jewish theology or practise what Jews practise to be in a holy relation with God. By contrast, until recently Christianity never accepted any double covenant theory. The normative teaching was *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, that Christianity is the exclusive path to salvation and those not subscribing to Christian belief lacked a valid relationship with God.¹³ Hence Christianity has been historically keen on conversion, for without conversion those outside the Church are lost theologically—both in this world and in the world to come.

whether they observe them or not. However, the term is frequently applied only to those who observe the Noahide commandments and who are contrasted with those who violate them, such as an idolater or an *oved avodah zarah*.

¹¹ Jacob Emden, *Seder olam rabab vezuta*, cited in Oscar Z. Fasman, ‘An Epistle on Tolerance by a “Rabbinic Zealot”’, in Leo Jung (ed.), *Judaism in a Changing World* (New York, 1939), 121–39.

¹² BT *San.* 105a; Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, ‘Laws of Repentance’, 3: 5; ‘Laws of Kings’, 8: 11. For an extended discussion of the topic of salvation for righteous non-Jews, see Eugene Korn, ‘Gentiles, the World to Come, and Judaism: The Odyssey of a Rabbinic Text’, *Modern Judaism*, 14 (1994), 265–87.

¹³ Whereas the early interpretation of this principle was that those not subscribing to Catholic belief were disqualified from eternal salvation, the more recent normative interpretation allows for some non-Christians to be saved, as ‘anonymous Christians’ (see *Catechism of Catholic Church*, 2nd edn. (Vatican City, 1997), pt. 1, §§846–8).

JEWISH LAW AND CHRISTIANITY

According to halakhah, is Christianity an invalid form of non-Jewish worship or is it an authentic, licit religion that conforms to the seven Noahide commandments? Interestingly, the talmudic rabbis do not discuss this question.¹⁴ There is only one explicit reference to the theological status of non-Jewish Christians in the Talmud, and rabbinic opinions differ as to whether the text refers to Christianity or to a separate Persian cult.¹⁵

Yet the theological status of Christianity was discussed at length in the Middle Ages, when two well-known and fundamentally opposing views arose. One is that of Maimonides in twelfth-century Muslim Spain and North Africa. He maintained that Christianity constituted *avodah zarah*—foreign and illicit worship, often connoting idolatry.¹⁶ To many moderns this may sound strange, but it was quite logical to Jews in the Middle Ages who were grounded in biblical and talmudic theology. Christianity violated the second commandment of the Decalogue: the prohibition against making graven images of God. Moreover, Christians venerated saints and prayed to intermediaries such as Mary, religious characteristics foreign to Jewish theology and practice. Yet for Maimonides the deepest problems of Christianity were the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.¹⁷ Maimonides insisted that monotheism must be pure, and that any understanding of God that denied the absolute unity of God violated God's essence.¹⁸ As a student of Aristotle's metaphysics, Maimonides maintained that to predicate any division of God is to imply that God is physical, limited, and imperfect, that is, that it is not God at all.¹⁹ For Maimonides, to proclaim 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One' is to understand that God is not only one, but an absolutely unique, indivisible, and simple being—and this understanding is incumbent on Jew and non-Jew alike. Hence the Trinitarian object of Christian worship could never be identical with the single Creator of the universe, and was necessarily some foreign concept. Since one of the seven Noahide commandments is the prohibition of *avodah zarah*, Maimonides ruled that Christians were sinful Noahides, and that their religion was illicit.

The other rabbinic opinion was that of Rabbi Menahem Me'iri, in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Provence. In his commentary on the tractate *Avodah zarah* and elsewhere, Me'iri taught that *avodah zarah* was not primarily

¹⁴ See Louis Jacobs, 'Attitudes towards Christianity in the Halakhah', in Z. Falk (ed.), *Gevuroth Haromah: Jewish Studies Offered at the Eightieth Birthday of Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler* (Jerusalem, 1987), p. xix.

¹⁵ BT *AZ 7b*; Me'iri, *Beit habehirah*, ad loc.

¹⁶ Maimonides on Mishnah, *AZ* 1: 3–4; *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Idolatry', 9: 4 (ed. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem, 1968)).

¹⁷ For further elaboration on this, see Alon Goshen-Gottstein in Chapter 11, below.

¹⁸ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, i. 50.

¹⁹ Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of the Foundations of the Torah', 1: 7.

theological or philosophical, and the negation of God's absolute unity does not *ipso facto* represent a God foreign to Judaism or constitute idolatry.²⁰ If seen from the perspective of the Bible rather than from that of Aristotelian philosophy, *avodah zarah* is cultic worship whose primary characteristic is the absence of moral demands upon its worshippers. Illicit religion is represented by those religions that do not impose the prohibitions on murder, theft, sexual immorality, and cruelty upon their adherents, that is, they neither insist upon the Noahide commandments nor satisfy the Noahide covenant.²¹ Me'iri claimed that while Trinitarian Christianity may violate pure monotheism, it is not *avodah zarah* because it worships the single Creator of heaven and earth and requires Christians to subscribe to the basic moral norms of civilization. Hence Christians fulfil the Noahide covenant, and Christianity is an autonomously valid religious form.

It is crucial to note the impact of experience on these opinions of Jewish law and theology.²² Maimonides never had any positive first-hand experience of Christians to counteract his philosophical conclusions. Except for his brief stay in crusader Palestine, he did not live with Christians and his understanding of Christianity came exclusively from books. Unlike Maimonides, Me'iri lived in Christian society in an era of relatively good Jewish-Christian relations in the latter part of his life. Me'iri encountered believing Christians as living human beings, discussed religion with Christian priests, and understood that Christians could be moral and religiously sophisticated people.²³ It made no sense to him to categorize them as idolaters, identical to the pagans to which the Bible and the Talmud refer. Also crucial were the demographic and political realities of the medieval Jewish communities in Christian Europe. Historians agree that the pressing communal, economic, and social conditions throughout Germany and France of that period influenced Me'iri's legal opinion—and those of most rabbinic authorities in Ashkenaz—towards Christianity, effecting a more permissive halakhic attitude regarding Jewish contacts with Christians of that period.²⁴

Life gave Me'iri what it never gave Maimonides, namely the incentive to

²⁰ See the recent scholarship of Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York, 1962), ch. 10; Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom* [Bein torah lehokhmah] (Jerusalem, 2000), ch. 3; id., 'Ones Possessed of Religion: Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of Me'iri', *Edah Journal*, 1/1 (2000), <www.edah.org>.

²¹ Me'iri, *Beit habehirah* on BT *San.* 57a; *AZ* 20a.

²² On this point, see also Adin Steinsaltz, 'Peace without Conciliation: The Irrelevance of "Toleration" in Judaism', *Common Knowledge*, 11/1 (2005), 41–7. The article is discussed at length by Goshen-Gottstein in Chapter 11, below.

²³ Me'iri, *Hibur bateshuvah*, ed. A. Schreiber (New York, 1950), 2. I would like to thank Greg Stern for calling my attention to this reference. See also Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 119, 124; Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1952–73), ix. 5–11; *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971–72), xiii. 1260–1.

²⁴ Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 116–17.

rule as a point of Jewish law that Christians did not practise idolatry or ‘foreign worship’. Me’iri understood the deep implications of his thesis, going as far as to include Christians in the biblical category of ‘brother’.²⁵ In doing so Me’iri achieved a conceptual transformation of *avodah zarah* within Jewish law, one rich in implications for contemporary Jewish rethinking about Christians and their faith.

In fact, however, neither the ruling of Maimonides regarding Christianity nor the exact view of Me’iri represents normative halakhah. Among other things, Maimonides ruled that a Jew is forbidden to go to, reside in, or even traverse a city where a church is located²⁶—a prohibition that no Jew, however scrupulous about adhering to halakhah, honours today. And we will soon see that no other authority accepts Me’iri’s opinion regarding the status of a Jewish convert to Christianity. In point of fact, these two authorities represent end points of the spectrum of rabbinic positions, while the majority of halakhic opinions lie within two intermediate categories. The opinions in the first intermediate category maintain that the traditional legal prohibitions regarding Jewish contact with worshippers of *avodah zarah* and the economic halakhic discriminations against those who practise *avodah zarah* do not apply to contact with Christians. This position—that Jewish law does not consider Christians to be worshippers of *avodah zarah*—is held by R. Yosef Karo (sixteenth century, Turkey and Safed)²⁷ and virtually all the great rabbinic authorities living in European Christian societies (*ḥakhmei ashkenaz*) including Rashi (eleventh century, France),²⁸ R. Asher Ben Yehiel (Rosh, thirteenth century, Germany),²⁹ and early modern authorities (Aharonim).³⁰ These authorities left open the possibility, however, that Christianity might still be *avodah zarah* and forbidden for non-Jews.³¹ And they certainly believed that Christianity was wrong for Jews, such that it is incumbent upon a Jew to die rather than to convert to Christianity.

The opinions in the second intermediate category claim that Christians do not practise *avodah zarah* precisely because Christianity as a system of belief and worship does not constitute *avodah zarah* for non-Jews. While Christianity is

²⁵ Me’iri, *Beit habehirab* on BT *BM* 59a.

²⁶ Maimonides on Mishnah, *AZ* 1: 1–3.

²⁷ *SA* ‘Yoreh de’ah’, 148: 2; *Beit yosef*, ‘Hoshen hamishpat’, 266.

²⁸ Rashi, *Responsa*, ed. Israel Elfenbein (New York, 1943), nos. 55, 155, 327.

²⁹ Asher ben Yehiel on BT *AZ* 4: 7.

³⁰ See later authorities, Peri Megadim, Mahatsit Hashekel, and Hatam Sofer, on ‘Orah ḥayim’, 156; *Minḥat eli’ezer*, i. 53: 3; Samuel Landau, *Noda biyehudab*, no. 148, all of whom rule that non-Jews are obligated to be pure monotheists. On Samuel Landau and *Noda biyehudab*, see n. 41, below.

³¹ The legal possibility that Christianity is *avodah zarah*, yet Christians would not be considered practitioners of *avodah zarah*, is based on the opinion of R. Yohanan: ‘Gentiles outside the land of Israel are not practitioners of *avodah zarah*, but only follow the traditions of their ancestors’ (BT *Hul.* 13b). Although the precise meaning of this statement is unclear, its legal import is not: non-Jews in the talmudic and post-talmudic eras are not subject to the halakhic restrictions applicable to those practising *avodah zarah*.

not pure monotheism, in fact it represents a valid positive belief in the same one Creator of heaven and earth that Judaism requires Jews to worship. The distinction between one standard of *avodah zarah* for Jews and another for non-Jews is exegetically based on the second commandment of the Decalogue addressed specifically to Jews at Sinai: 'There shall not be *for you* other gods before me' (Exod. 20: 3). According to rabbinic tradition, idolatry had already been prohibited to non-Jews and Noahides in Genesis 2: 16, hence the commandment in Exodus requiring pure monotheism must address Jews uniquely ('for you') and not apply to non-Jews.³² In addition to Me'iri, this was the halakhic position of medieval authorities (Rishonim) such as R. Ya'akov Ben Meir (Rabbenu Tam, twelfth century, France),³³ R. Me'ir ben Shimon Hame'ili (thirteenth to fourteenth century, France),³⁴ R. Shimon bar Tsemah Duran (Tashbats, fourteenth century, North Africa),³⁵ and later rabbinic authorities such as R. Moses Isserles (Rema, sixteenth century, Poland),³⁶ R. Shabetai Hakohen (Shakh, seventeenth century, Bohemia),³⁷ R. Moses Rivkis

³² See R. Joseph Saul Nathanson, *Sbo'el umeshiv*, i. 26, 51; Dov Baer ben Judah Treves, *Sefer ravvid hazabav*, on Exod. 20: 3. See also Obadiah Yosef, *Yehaveh da'at* 4: 45 (note), who finds textual warrant for this position in the book of Ruth and BT *Yev.* 47b.

³³ A number of scholars believe that this position is more correctly attributed to R. Isaac (Ri), Rabbenu Tam's nephew (see Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 35). Whether it is Rabbenu Tam's or R. Isaac's, it is based on the majority interpretation of BT *San.* 63b, *asur*. See David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York, 1989), 42–53. For a comprehensive list of later authoritative rabbinic opinions on this issue, see Moshe Yehudah Miller, 'Regarding the Law that Noahides are not Admonished Against Associationism' (Heb.), in *The Torah of Life* [Torat hayim] (Queens, NY, 2000). For other interpretations that maintain that Rabbenu Tam believed that Christianity remained in the category of *avodah zarah*, see David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London, 2001), app. 3; J. David Bleich, 'Divine Unity in Maimonides, the Tosafists and Me'iri', in Lenn E. Goodman (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany, NY, 1992), 239, who concedes that this variant reading is a minority opinion among later rabbinic authorities. It is important to note that even according to these minority interpretations of the Tosafot (whether Rabbenu Tam or R. Isaac), Christianity differs from the *avodah zarah* of antiquity, since it recognizes as God the one Creator of heaven and earth, whereas classical *avodah zarah* recognized as gods entities wholly different from the Creator. (Berger has termed the former '*avodah zarah* in a monotheistic mode'.) We thus arrive at a paradox: it is precisely these restrictive minority interpretations acknowledging the difference between classical and Christian forms of *avodah zarah* that create the logical opening for not applying to Christianity the halakhic requirement of intolerance towards (classical) *avodah zarah* and its worshippers in the Land of Israel under Jewish sovereignty. Berger correctly sees this logical implication and suggests such a policy (see David Berger, 'Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts', in Marc Stern (ed.), *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age*, The Orthodox Forum (Lanham, Md., 2005), 101. This also appears to be the position of Isaac Herzog (see 'Minority Rights According to Halakhah' (Heb.), *Tehumin*, 2 (1981), 174 n. 9).

³⁴ Hame'ili considers Christians to be *gerei toshav* (resident aliens) who observe the prohibitions against *avodah zarah* (*Milhemet mitsvah*, fo. 225a).

³⁵ Shimon bar Tsemah Duran, *Responsa*, i. 139.

³⁶ Moses Isserles, *Darkhei mosheh* on *Tur*, 'Orah hayim', 151; id., gloss on SA 'Orah hayim' 156: 1.

³⁷ Shabetai Hakohen, gloss on SA 'Yoreh de'ah', 151: 4.

(Be'er Hagolah, seventeenth century, Lithuania),³⁸ R. Ya'ir Baharakh (seventeenth century, Germany),³⁹ R. Jacob Emden (Ya'avets, eighteenth century, Germany),⁴⁰ R. Yehezkel Landau (Noda Biyehudah, eighteenth century, Prague),⁴¹ R. Zvi Hirsch Hayes (nineteenth century, Galicia),⁴² R. Avraham Borenstein (Avnei Nezer, nineteenth century, Poland),⁴³ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (nineteenth century, Germany),⁴⁴ R. David Zvi Hoffman (nineteenth century Germany),⁴⁵ and others.⁴⁶

Importantly, many of these later authorities go well beyond asserting that Christianity is not *avodah zarab* and accord positive theological status to Christian belief. Here are the words of R. Rivkis:

The gentiles in whose shadow Jews live and among whom Jews are disbursed are not idolaters. Rather they believe in *creatio ex nihilo* and the Exodus from Egypt and the main principles of faith. Their intention is to the Creator of Heaven and Earth and we are obligated to pray for their welfare.⁴⁷

And R. Emden:

The Nazarene brought a double goodness to the world . . . The Christian eradicated *avodah zarab*, removed idols (from the nations) and obligated them [to follow] the seven *mitsvot* of Noah so that they would not behave like animals of the field, and instilled them firmly with moral traits . . . Christians and Muslims are congregations that (work) for the sake of heaven—(people) who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of heaven and whose reward will not be denied.⁴⁸

³⁸ Moses Rivkis, gloss on *SA 'Hoshen hamishpat'*, 425: 5.

³⁹ Ya'ir Baharakh, *Havot ya'ir*, nos. 1, 185.

⁴⁰ Jacob Emden, *Seder olam rabab vezuta*, 35–7; id., *Sefer hasbimush*, 15–17.

⁴¹ Some scholars mistakenly identify Yehezkel Landau with his son, Samuel. The latter explicitly claimed that Christianity is *avodah zarab* for Christians because of its doctrine of the Trinity (*Noda biyehudah*, 'Yoreh de'ah', no. 148). R. Samuel signs his name to this responsum, hence its authorship is certain. I thank Marc Shapiro for pointing this out to me. The father, Yehezkel, had a positive evaluation of Christian belief for Christians: 'Regarding the nations of our day in whose midst we live, they believe in the fundamentals of faith, in creation and in the prophecy of the prophets and all the miracles and wonders that are written in the Torah and the books of the prophets' (Introduction to *Noda biyehudah*, ed. Mehadurah Tinyama (New York, 1960)).

⁴² Zvi Hirsch Hayes, *The Works of Maharats Hayet* [He'elot veteshuvot maharats] (Jerusalem, 1948), 66, 489–90.

⁴³ Avraham Borenstein, *Avnei nezer*, no. 123: 9.

⁴⁴ Samson Raphael Hirsch, 'Talmudic Judaism and Society', in *Principles of Education*, Collected Writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch 1 (New York, 1996), 225–7; id., *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, ed. and annotated Joseph Elias (Jerusalem, 1995).

⁴⁵ David Zvi Hoffman, *Der Shulchan-Aruch* (Berlin, 1885); id., *Melamed leho'il*, 'Yoreh de'ah', no. 55.

⁴⁶ This is also the explicit or implicit position of Me'ir Leib ben Mikha'el (Malbim), commentary on 2 Kgs 17: 7–9; 41: 32–4; Zvi Hirsch Shapira, *Darkhei teshuvah*, gloss on *SA 'Yoreh de'ah'*, 151: 1; Jacob Ettinger, *Binyan tsiyon*, no. 63; Barukh Halevi Epstein, *Torah temimah*, on Exod. 21: 35 and Deut. 22: 3.

⁴⁷ Moses Rivkis, gloss on *SA 'Hoshen hamishpat'*, 425: 5.

⁴⁸ Jacob Emden, *Seder olam rabab vezuta*, 35–7. For a fuller explanation of R. Emden's position, see Harvey Falk, 'Rabbi Jacob Emden's Views on Christianity', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 19/1

The goal of [Christians and Muslims] is to promote Godliness among the nations . . . to make known that there is a ruler in heaven and earth, who governs and monitors and rewards and punishes . . . We should consider Christians and Muslims as instruments for the fulfilment of the prophecy that the knowledge of God will one day spread throughout the earth. Whereas the nations before them worshipped idols, denied God's existence, and thus did not recognize God's power or retribution, the rise of Christianity and Islam served to spread among the nations, to the furthest ends of the earth, the knowledge that there is one God who rules the world, who rewards and punishes and reveals himself to man. Indeed, Christian scholars have not only won acceptance among the nations for the revelation of the Written Torah but have also defended God's Oral Law. For when, in their hostility to the Torah, ruthless persons in their own midst sought to abrogate and uproot the Talmud, others from among them arose to defend it and to repulse the attempts.⁴⁹

And R. Hirsch:

Judaism does not say, 'There is no salvation outside of me.' Although disparaged because of its alleged particularism, the Jewish religion actually teaches that the upright of all peoples are headed towards the highest goal. In particular, they have been at pains to stress that, while in other respects their views and ways of life may differ from those of Judaism, the peoples in whose midst the Jews are now living [i.e. Christians] have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of divine revelation. They profess their belief in the God of heaven and earth as proclaimed in the Bible and they acknowledge the sovereignty of divine Providence in both this life and the next. Their acceptance of the practical duties incumbent upon all men by the will of God distinguishes these nations from the heathen and idolatrous nations of the talmudic era.⁵⁰

Before Israel set out on its long journey through the ages and the nations . . . it produced an offshoot [Christianity] that had to become estranged from it in great measure, in order to bring to the world—sunk in idol worship, violence, immorality and the degradation of man—at least the tidings of the One Alone, of the brotherhood of all men, and of man's superiority over the beast. It was to teach the renunciation of the worship of wealth and pleasures, albeit not their use in the service of the One Alone. Together with a later offshoot [Islam] it represented a major step in bringing the world closer to the goal of all history.⁵¹

In the twentieth century a number of rabbinic authorities did not rule officially on the halakhic status of Christianity for non-Jews or whether

(1982), 105–11; Moshe Miller, 'Rabbi Jacob Emden's Attitude Toward Christianity', in M. Shmidman (ed.), *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York, 2008), ii. 105–136.

⁴⁹ Jacob Emden on *Avot* 4: 11.

⁵⁰ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Principles of Education*, 'Talmudic Judaism and Society', 225–7.

⁵¹ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*.

Christianity was a positive religious phenomenon.⁵² Yet there were other great rabbinic authorities in this century such as Rabbi Yehiel Halevi Epstein (*Arukh bashulḥan*),⁵³ Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook,⁵⁴ R. Yehiel Jacob Weinberg (*Serdei esh*),⁵⁵ Isaac Herzog,⁵⁶ Hayim David Halevi,⁵⁷ Joseph Messas,⁵⁸ and Joseph Eliyahu Henkin⁵⁹ who regarded Christianity positively and concluded that it does not constitute *avodah zarah* for non-Jews. Others ruled so implicitly.⁶⁰

Thus an accurate logical map of Jewish legal opinions indicates that nearly all rabbinic authorities living in Christian societies ruled that Christians cannot be identified with the idolaters of antiquity and that the legal prohibitions attaching to biblical and talmudic non-Jews do not apply to contemporary

⁵² It appears that the American Orthodox leader Joseph B. Soloveitchik is in this category. I have argued elsewhere ('The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue') that Soloveitchik's essay 'Confrontation' is a statement of Jewish policy and because it is devoid of any halakhic language and argumentation it lacks halakhic status. Soloveitchik wrote 'Confrontation' before *Nostra aetate* and before the dramatic changes in Christian teachings about Judaism and Jews. In the essay he argued on prudential grounds against Jewish participation in theological debate or dialogue with Christian theologians, but advocated co-operation with Christians in moral, social, and political areas. To my knowledge, he never issued a formal halakhic ruling on the status of Christianity for Christians. From his behaviour, however, he could not have followed Maimonides, who outlawed residing in a city with a church (see Maimonides on Mishnah, *AZ* 1: 3–4). Living in the largely Catholic metropolis of Boston, Soloveitchik delivered his spiritual confession, 'The Lonely Man of Faith', at St John's Catholic seminary in Brighton. There is also anecdotal evidence that while recuperating in a hospital he tried to persuade his secular doctor to return to his Christian faith, something that Maimonides could not have done given his view of Christianity as *avodah zarah* for everyone.

⁵³ Yehiel Halevi Epstein, *Arukh bashulḥan*, 'Orah hayim', 156: 4.

⁵⁴ Abraham Isaac Kook accepts Me'iri's position and considers Christians (and Muslims) in the category of resident aliens, who do not practise *avodah zarah* (Abraham Isaac Kook, *Letters of the Ra'ayah* [Igerot hara'ayah] (Jerusalem, 1985), vol. i, no. 89).

⁵⁵ Weinberg, who advocated unqualified acceptance of Me'iri's position, considers pious Christians who follow the precepts of Christianity 'to be blessed' (letter to S. Atlas (26 Oct. 1964), cited in Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884–1966* (London, 1999), 182).

⁵⁶ Herzog, 'Rights of Minorities According to Halakhah', 174–5.

⁵⁷ Hayim David Halevi, *Make a Teacher for Yourself* [Aseh lekhaḥ rav] (Tel Aviv, 1989), pt. 5, pp. 65–7. For a fuller analysis of Halevi's position on Christianity, see David Ellenson, 'Rabbi Hayim David Halevi on Christianity and Christians', in Franklin T. Harkins (ed.), *Transforming Relations: Essays on Jews and Christians throughout History in Honor of Michael Signer* (Notre Dame, Ind., 2010).

⁵⁸ Joseph Messas, *Shemesh umagen*, vol. iii (Jerusalem, 2000); id., *Sefer mayim hayim*, vol. ii, §66.

⁵⁹ See Berger, 'Jews and Gentiles and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos', 100.

⁶⁰ Marc Shapiro also noted that the following permit Jews to contribute to the building of a church, on the assumption that Christian worship is not sinful for gentiles: R. Marcus Horowitz, *Mateh levi*, vol. ii (Frankfurt, 1933), 'Yoreh de'ah', no. 28. See also David Ellenson, 'A Disputed Precedent: The Prague Organ in Nineteenth-Century Central European Legal Literature and Polemics', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 40 (London, 1995), 251–64; R. Isaac Unna, *Sho'alin vedorshin* (Tel Aviv, 1964), no. 35; R. Yehudah Herzl Henkin, *Benei vanim* (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. iii, no. 36 (Marc Shapiro: 'Of Books and Bans', *Edah Journal*, 3/2 (2003), <<http://edah.org>>).

Christians. Some Rishonim, namely Me'iri and Rabbenu Tam, and the majority of Aharonim had a more positive view of Christianity itself, ruling that it was a valid religion for non-Jews, but not for Jews. Hence there exists normative halakhic precedent for ruling that Christianity, qua religion, is a valid faith for non-Jews, one that is beneficial to the world and that Jews can appreciate and encourage non-Jews to practise. Given this spectrum of halakhic opinion, the decision to adopt the rabbinic position that regards Christianity negatively or the one that regards it as a positive theological phenomenon will most likely depend on sociological, historical, and ideological considerations that lie outside the domain of formal halakhah. The religious orientation of contemporary Jews towards Christianity is most often dispositional (based on history or memory) or prudential (based on expectation of future consequences).

There is a significant philosophical implication of the second position that demands absolute monotheism of Jews but permits non-absolute monotheism for non-Jews. Because it asserts one definition of 'foreign worship' for Jews that includes associationism, that is, the addition of another thing to the single Creator of heaven and earth, and yet another definition of *avodah zarah* for non-Jews (worship of entities that exclude the one Creator of the universe), the halakhic concept of *avodah zarah* is better understood as a legal standard of unacceptable belief and behaviour rather than as a concept implying a theological truth claim. Logically, ascribing a given property to a specific object is either correct or incorrect; it cannot be different for different people. This is also true for what one predicates of God. Were the legal concept of *avodah zarah* to imply a philosophical truth claim (that is, *avodah zarah* constitutes an ontological error because it misidentifies something that is in fact not divine with God), the criterion for *avodah zarah* would of necessity be universal and undifferentiated for both Jews and non-Jews. But according to most Aharonim, Jewish law *does* rule that the same belief may be 'foreign worship' for Jews when it is not so for non-Jews. Hence *avodah zarah* should be more properly understood as representing that which is beyond the limit of the legally tolerable—a standard that can vary for Jews and non-Jews without entailing any conceptual incoherence.

A simple analogy can help clarify this point: according to Jewish law, eating pork is an act that is forbidden to Jews but permitted to non-Jews. This is possible because the laws of *kasbrut* do not refer to any inherent characteristic of pork. They merely lay down behavioural norms. So too, the laws relating to *avodah zarah* relate to norms and do not assert any inherent characteristic of God. This conceptualization of *avodah zarah* is true to the literal meaning of the term, for something can be 'foreign' (i.e. unacceptable) for one person or community, while not so to another. This conclusion has a crucial implication for theological pluralism: if the halakhic category of *avodah zarah* is a legal standard rather than a claim about theological (in)accuracy, then Jewish law

does not take an ultimate metaphysical position regarding the nature of God and should be able to coexist with a limited number of contrasting theologies.

Finally, it is important to recognize that although Me'iri is often used as a basis for this second intermediary position, he went beyond it, ruling that Christianity was not *avodah zarah* even for Jews.⁶¹ This aspect of his position is accepted by no other rabbinic authority and therefore plays no role in normative Jewish legal opinion.

Except for Maimonides and Messas, the aforementioned rabbinic authorities encountered Christians within their experience as real human beings, not as stereotypes or abstract legal categories. It is hardly credible that their social, moral, and interpersonal experiences with living Christians did not influence their halakhic and theological opinions. As cited earlier, there is no doubt that economic factors and Jewish commercial interaction with—and dependency on—their Christian neighbours in Ashkenaz also played a significant role in permissive rabbinic judgements towards Christians and Christianity.⁶²

If one looks at this map temporally, one can plot four stages in the evolution of Jewish religious thinking about Christianity under different historical circumstances:

1. In the first and second centuries, Jewish Christians came to be regarded as heretics (*minim*) or apostates from Judaism. For Jews to believe in Jesus and the 'new covenant' was considered *avodah zarah*.
2. In the Middle Ages, when Jews lived in small communities in Christian Europe and were dependent on economic interaction with Christians, most Rishonim in Ashkenaz ruled (in accordance with the talmudic opinion of R. Yohanan previously cited) that Christians were not idolaters, but they still considered belief in Christian doctrine to be illegitimate *avodah zarah*.
3. In the late Middle Ages and early modernity, the majority of Aharonim did not consider Christianity to be *avodah zarah* for non-Jews.
4. From the seventeenth century to the twentieth, when Christian toleration of Jews grew,⁶³ a number of rabbinic authorities began to appreciate Christianity as a positive historical and theological phenomenon for non-Jews that helped spread fundamental beliefs of Judaism (for example, God, revelation, and the Noahide commandments) and thus advanced the Jewish religious purpose.

⁶¹ Me'iri, *Beit habehirab* on BT *Hor.* 219.

⁶² See Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, ch. 3.

⁶³ Katz advances the causal thesis that budding Christian tolerance significantly influenced the development of a positive halakhic attitude towards them by traditionalist Orthodox rabbis of the time: 'The first signs of tolerance towards Jews . . . gave rise to a corresponding attitudes on the part of Jews to Christians' (*Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 166). It is evident from the statements of Rivkis, Emden, and Ya'ir Baharakh (to which Katz is referring) that this positive attitude referred not only to Christians, but also to Christianity qua religious belief system.

Two points are critical: first, Jewish law regarding Christians and Christianity has undergone an evolution with changing historical circumstances. Second, halakhah and traditional Jewish theology contain the seeds for a limited theological openness by recognizing the possibility of other valid religions and forms of worship. In principle, halakhah allows for a positive view of Christianity (for non-Jews).

Jewish historical experience with Christians cuts both ways, however. In spite of the open halakhic and theological possibilities towards Christianity, many historically oriented Jews have been reluctant to accord Christianity positive value because of the traditional Christian supersessionist teachings about Judaism that spawned virulent *adversus Judaeos* Christian teachings. These teachings (later called the ‘Doctrine of Contempt’ by Jules Isaacs) denied any continuing theological validity to Judaism and promoted demonic understandings of Jews that were the basis for hateful antisemitic behaviour throughout much of the Middle Ages. Contemporary scholars have uncovered the substantive influence that the *adversus Judaeos* teachings have played in shaping antisemitic attitudes and antisemitic persecution throughout Jewish–Christian history, into modernity and including the Holocaust.⁶⁴ And for many Jews up to today—both rabbis and laity alike—the wounds of that suffering are still too fresh to allow for any religious re-evaluation of Christianity and its believers.

CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM TODAY

Jews who wish to preserve—or perhaps recreate—pre-Emancipation social conditions and isolate themselves from positive relations with Christians will find refuge in the halakhic attitude of Maimonides and his disciples.⁶⁵ Yet after the thicket of legal obstacles is cleared, Jews who have been touched by modernity and who value openness to Western culture, dignified relations with Christians, and appreciation of Christianity’s moral and spiritual values can also find ample halakhic justification for their aspirations.

Of course, safeguarding Jewish identity demands limits on interaction with Christians and Christian culture. Without such limits in an open pluralistic society, assimilation is unavoidable and both Jews and Judaism are likely to be absorbed totally by the dominant Christian population and culture. Assuming such limits can be maintained, the salient question today for Jews regarding

⁶⁴ Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, ch. 4; James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword* (New York, 2001); Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York, 1985); Malcolm Hay, *Europe and the Jews* (Boston, 1960); Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel* (New York, 1971); id., *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1965); Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (New Haven, 1943); Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews* (Portland, Oreg., 2004).

⁶⁵ As indicated above, this is a practical impossibility on a consistent basis for one who lives in a city or a culture containing Christians.

Christianity is: 'Is Christianity in the twenty-first century still a physical and theological threat to Jews and Judaism as in the past, or is it now a potential spiritual and political ally?' If the former, attempts at developing a positive appreciation of Christianity may well imperil distinctive Jewish survival; if the latter, then a more open Jewish theology of Christianity is possible—nay, desirable.

In considering this question, we must examine contemporary Christianity in more detail. With the Second Vatican Council's proclamation of *Nostra aetate* in 1965, the Catholic Church formally repudiated antisemitism, first 'deploring' it categorically, and subsequently 'condemning' it in official documents.⁶⁶ Later still, Pope John Paul II repeatedly called antisemitism 'a sin against God and humanity'.⁶⁷ Moreover, the condemnation of antisemitism is a tenet of every large Protestant church today, whether liberal or conservative.⁶⁸ At a time when antisemitism is widespread in the Islamic world and no longer an embarrassment in many secularist radical leftist circles of Europe, official Christian rejection of antisemitism functions as a strong positive force throughout the world.

Nostra aetate also formally rejected the ancient charge of deicide, which was the primary theological basis for so much violence against, and contempt for, the Jewish people. It is important to understand that the document did not 'forgive' the Jews for deicide—it rejected any basis for the charge. Once again, nearly every Protestant denomination has followed suit. Nor did these churches stop at repudiating this noxious doctrine: many have issued profound statements of repentance for their role in antisemitism and the Holocaust.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, 'Nostra Aetate' (n. 4)* (Vatican City, 1975), preamble; Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church* (Vatican City, 1985), §6.

⁶⁷ Papal statements in Fall 1990 and Winter 1991, cited in *Vatican City Pontifical Council on Christian Unity: Information Service*, 75/4 (1994), 172–8; papal address, Hungary (16 Aug. 1991), cited in *Origins*, 21/13 (5 Sept. 1991), 203.

⁶⁸ See for instance the denunciation of antisemitism by the World Council of Churches in its first assembly (Amsterdam, 1948) and its third assembly (New Delhi, 1961) or the 1994 statement by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which repudiated Martin Luther's antisemitic statements (all statements available at <www.jcrelations.net>; see also Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, 253–5).

⁶⁹ See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (Vatican City, 1998); statement of the German Catholic bishops on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz (27 Jan. 1995); *Declaration of Repentance by the Roman Catholic Bishops of France* (30 Sept. 1997) (all available at <http://www.jcrelations.net>). During his visit to the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem in March 2000 Pope John Paul II stated: 'God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. Asking forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.' For Protestant documents, see Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, 256.

The Vatican established diplomatic relations with the State of Israel in 1994, and today virtually every major Protestant church officially recognizes the right of Israel to live in safety and security. After the Holocaust, many Jews today consider Israel and its blessings of sovereignty and effective self-defence capacities to be the best security that Jews have for a future that is more hopeful than the past. Thus widespread Christian recognition of Israel increases the prospects for Jewish safety and security.

Yet part of the Christian picture regarding Israel remains troubling. Mainline Protestant criticism of Israel and hostile liberal church actions such as divestment from companies doing business with Israel are sources of deep concern. Although no government policy anywhere should be immune from moral critique—particularly from religious leaders—Jews of all political orientations cannot ignore the possibility that the vehement and unbalanced Protestant criticisms of Israel are rooted in traditional Christian biases against Jews and Judaism. Because Israel is the public face of the Jewish people today—indeed the ‘body’ of the Jewish people—unjust attitudes to Israel often indicate a continuing underlying animus to Jews and the Jewish people.

These attitudes are most obvious when Jews possess power and lay claim to national equality. A prime offender is the politically driven school of Palestinian Liberation Theology,⁷⁰ which has found its way to the sympathetic ears of many liberal Protestant churches in Europe and America. This thinking leads quickly to replacement theology that substitutes oppressed people (read: Palestinians) for the Jewish people as God’s partners in the biblical covenant. Their theology assaults the Jewish covenant, the Bible, and the very legitimacy of Israel and Jewish peoplehood. Jews rightly understand this as a rejection of the recent salutary changes in Christian theology and a reversion to the traditional Christian denial of Judaism that is antisemitic at its core.⁷¹ It is important to note that the Catholic Church has no connection to Palestinian Liberation Theology and little enthusiasm for liberation theology of any kind.

More common are some American national Protestant church positions on the Middle East conflict. While recognizing the right of Israel to exist, they identify nearly exclusively with Palestinian arguments and are so critical of Israeli defensive actions that it is difficult to see any serious concern for the welfare of Israel or individual Israelis. Such unjust criticisms undermine the security of Israel and raise the historical spectre of Christians again striving to render Jews defenceless and celebrating Jewish victimization. Given the violent past, Jews today are particularly vigilant about this possibility. Unlike

⁷⁰ See Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice* (Maryknoll, NY, 1989); Mitri Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis, 1995).

⁷¹ See Adam Gregerman, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles: Liberation Theology and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 41 (2004), 313–40.

national church leadership, the majority of Christians in America and many in Europe are strongly sympathetic to Israel and reject this hostile view.⁷² Yet all Christians need to better understand that national independence is constitutive of Judaism, that it is essential to the Jewish understanding of the Jewish people's biblical covenant with God, that for most Jews Israel is an existential issue rather than a mere political interest, and that serious Christian support for Israeli security is a *sine qua non* for good faith relations with the Jewish people.

Notwithstanding the liberal Christian criticism of Israel, the transformations achieved by official Catholic and Protestant renunciations of antisemitism and anti-Judaism have a significance beyond politics. The Second Vatican Council radically changed the theological posture of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish people, and helped stimulate the change in Protestant theology.⁷³ Later the Church rejected the old doctrine of hard supersessionism—in which Christianity entirely *replaced* Judaism—by acknowledging the living and autonomous validity of Judaism. (Hence some Christians no longer speak of the 'Old Testament' but of the 'First Testament', 'Hebrew Scriptures', or 'Shared Scriptures' to ensure there is no linguistic implication that the Jewish covenant has fallen into obsolescence and is no longer valid.) Church recognition of Israel also has theological implications: it willy-nilly vitiates the doctrines of the early Church Fathers that the Jewish people lost all rights to their biblical homeland because they rejected Jesus as the messiah and that God decreed that Jews wander throughout Christendom in abject humiliation because Jews bear the curse of Cain as collective punishment for deicide.⁷⁴ These early teachings not only provided the basis for historical discrimination against Jews in Christian societies, they also fuelled the polemic against the continuing spiritual integrity of Judaism. They are now both implicitly and explicitly repudiated by most churches. Although it is sometimes stated in nuanced or implicit fashion, some Christian theologians now appear to accept their own double covenant theory, affirming the concurrent validity of the ancient Jewish *berit* alongside the Christian covenant.⁷⁵

⁷² See Eugene Korn, *Divestment from Israel, the Liberal Churches, and Jewish Responses: A Strategic Analysis*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <<http://www.JCPA.org/jcpa/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=254&PID=0&IID=1421>>.

⁷³ For overviews of the changes in Christian doctrine, see Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*; Eugene Fisher and Leon Klenicki (eds.), *In Our Time: The Flowering of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue* (New York, 1990); Eugene Korn, 'The Man of Faith and Theological Dialogue'.

⁷⁴ This was understood early by Joseph B. Soloveitchik (see 'Kol Dodi Dofek', in Bernhard H. Rosenberg (ed.), *Theological and Halakhic Responses to the Holocaust* (New York, 1992), 70–1; Korn, 'The Man of Faith and Theological Dialogue', 301).

⁷⁵ e.g. Franz Mussler, *Tractate on the Jews: The Significance of Judaism for Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, 1984), 226; Marcus Braybrooke, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: The Next Steps* (London, 2000); John Pawlikowski, 'Toward a Theology of Religious Diversity', *Journal of*

In 2002 delegates of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs seemed to acknowledge this explicitly. Basing themselves on earlier papal and Vatican statements, they proclaimed 'a Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people' and that 'campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church'.⁷⁶

It is important to note that traditional supersessionist and 'mission to the Jews' doctrines still hold theoretical sway among some influential Christian ecclesiastic officials, causing justified consternation among the Jewish people. *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* caused alarm in some traditional Catholic circles⁷⁷ and some conservative Catholics and Evangelicals at the time promptly proclaimed the Catholic authors heretics for their limited theological pluralism. Witness also the 1999 mission statement of the Southern Baptist Board that denied the efficacy of Jewish prayer, and the debate over the proper interpretation of the 2000 Vatican document, *Dominus Iesus*,⁷⁸ written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

The discomfort regarding *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* has apparently continued, for in the summer of 2009 the United States Conference of Bishops felt constrained to issue a formal clarification of some of the document's ambiguities and insist on the continuing obligation of Christians to evangelize to Jews (as well as to all non-Christians), to which a number of prominent Jews representing Jewish organizations responded with serious concern.⁷⁹ Despite

Ecumenical Studies, 11 (Winter 1989), 138–53; see also Pawlikowski's excellent overview of these trends in 'Reflections on Covenant and Mission: Forty Years after *Nostra Aetate*', *Crosscurrents*, 56/4 (2007), 70–94.

⁷⁶ Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* (12 Aug. 2002), available at <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=966>>.

⁷⁷ See Avery Dulles, 'Covenant and Mission', *America Magazine*, 187/12 (Oct. 2002), <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2550>; see also Korn, 'The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue', 302–3.

⁷⁸ See David Berger, 'On *Dominus Iesus* and the Jews', and the response of Cardinal Walter Kasper, 'The Good Olive Tree', both originally delivered at the seventeenth meeting of the International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee, New York (1 May 2001), both printed in *America Magazine*, 195/7 (Sept. 2001) and available at <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=1034>.

⁷⁹ See Committee on Doctrine and Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, 'A Note on Ambiguities Contained in "Reflections on Covenant and Mission"' (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 18 June 2009), available at <<http://www.ccrj.us/index.php/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/conversion/559-usccb-09june18.html>>; Committee on Doctrine and Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, 'National Jewish Interfaith Leadership Letter on USCCB "Note on Ambiguities"' available at <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/pdf/covenant09e.pdf>>. The American bishops later agreed to rescind the statements relating the evangelization of Jews, at least in the context of Jewish–Catholic dialogue.

these dissenting reactions to *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, it is important to note that today there is no office in the Catholic Church, nor any resources spent, dedicated to converting Jews specifically, nor have efforts towards conversion actually appeared in contemporary Jewish–Catholic dialogue. This is also the case in liberal Protestant churches, but not Evangelical ones.

Notwithstanding these points, it is hard to overestimate the difficulty—and the impressive character—of the changes represented by ‘the six Rs’. Every religion with a rich tradition is necessarily conservative, and anyone familiar with orthodox religious systems knows how difficult it is to effect a change in theology and policy. If fundamental principles change at all, it is most often in an evolutionary fashion. However, in slightly more than forty years a revolution has occurred in Christian theology. The transformation is incomplete and its process is continuing, yet it is undeniable that a majority of ecclesiastical authorities have now adopted the ‘new teaching’ about Judaism and the Jewish people, and that the groundwork has been laid for an end to the spiritual and physical enmity between Christianity and the Jewish people.

A NEW THEOLOGY AND A DIFFERENT FUTURE?

Perhaps more important than the challenge of finding a path for neutral Jewish–Christian theological coexistence is the bolder enquiry of whether there are grounds for a new *theological* relationship and mutual appreciation between the faiths. If an important religious question for Jews before modernity was whether Christians gained legitimacy by fulfilling the obligations of the Noahide covenant, the bolder and more important contemporary Jewish theological challenge is whether Jews can understand Christians and Christianity in a new way. Are there grounds for a new *theological* relationship in which Jews understand Christians as participating in a common covenant with them? And can this new theological relationship function as the foundation for Jews and Christians for forging an active partnership in building a future based on a common religious mission?

On practical grounds, there should be no religious objection to such partnership, for even Maimonides—the harshest rabbinic critic of Christian theology—accorded Christianity a positive instrumental role in history:

There is no human power to comprehend the designs of the Creator of the universe . . . Thus the words of Jesus and of the Ishmaelite [i.e. Mohammed] who came after him were only to prepare the way for the messiah and to repair the whole world [*letaken et ha'olam*] to serve the Lord in unison, for it is written, ‘I shall make all the peoples pure of speech, so that they all call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one heart’ [Zeph. 3: 9].⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, ‘Laws of Kings’, 11: 4 (ed. Kafih).

Note that Maimonides' statement claims that Christianity as a historical phenomenon helps fulfil *the Jewish covenantal mission* (however imperfectly) by preparing the world to serve the Lord.⁸¹ The passage implies that Christians and Jews have different roles in the same divine mission in history, rather than being members of totally independent faiths. How Christianity as *avodah zarab* can do this is surely a divine mystery for Maimonides—hence his opening explanatory confession.

On the theological level, closer to our time rabbis Rivkis, Emden, Hirsch, and others were explicit in interpreting Christianity as going well beyond the Noahide requirements since Christianity commits Christians to believe in the Creator of the universe, the veracity of the Sinaitic revelation, and messianic history. In other words, there is an important theological affinity between Christian belief and mission and the Jewish covenantal role in history. To quote once again the clear words of Emden: 'Their goal is to promote Godliness among the nations . . . and to make known that there is a ruler in heaven and earth who governs and monitors and punishes'; and those of Hirsch: 'Israel produced an offshoot [Christianity] to bring to the world . . . the tidings of the One Alone . . . It represented a major step in bringing the world closer to the goal of all history.' Although Christianity and Judaism have critical—and seemingly permanent—differences in their eyes, Christianity has promoted fundamental aspects of Jewish theology and belief.

Catholic and Protestant doctrines have always insisted that Christianity is the extension of the Jewish covenant at Sinai, but this would constitute a radical thesis for Jewish theology. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Jews (or Christians) could logically understand Christians standing at Sinai while not being obligated to observe all the Sinaitic *mitsvot*, without at least part of the Sinai covenant being invalidated or superseded. As obvious illustrations, the Sinaitic Decalogue prohibits making images of God and requires sabbath observance on the seventh day of the week—two commandments that Christianity does not observe.

Yet Christians and Christianity are closer to Judaism in history, mission, and theological content than, for example, any Asian religion that might fulfil the Noahide commandments. It is clear that Christian covenant stands theologically somewhere between Noah and Sinai. According to the traditionalists

⁸¹ Nahmanides (13th-century, Spain) concurs with Maimonides on this point. Quoting Maimonides at length, he emphasizes the moral and theological progress that Christianity brought to the nations of the world and distinguishes Christians and Muslims from pre-Christian practitioners of *avodah zarab*. This historical progress is a direct result of Christianity inheriting the religious and moral principles of Torah. In Nahmanides' words, Christians are 'inheritors of Torah' (*Writings of Ramban* [Kitvei haramban], ed. Charles Chavel [Jerusalem, 1969], i. 143–4). Simon Federbush maintains that Nahmanides agrees with those rabbinic authorities who deny that Christianity is *avodah zarab* (*Studies in Judaism* [Hikrei yahadut] [Jerusalem, 1965]).

Emden and Hirsch, who claim that Christianity helped spread the knowledge of the Creator throughout the world, there are solid grounds for probing the possibility that Christianity has entered into the Jewish covenantal mission that began with Abraham. For numerous Jewish thinkers in medieval and modern times, it is teaching the world about God and his moral law that is precisely the purpose of the Jewish covenant. Maimonides too stressed that teaching the world the knowledge of the one God of heaven and earth was the primary vocation of Abraham,⁸² and both Rabbi Obadiah Seforno in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance Italy and Rabbi Hirsch in nineteenth-century Germany interpreted the covenantal charge to the Jewish people at Sinai: 'You shall be a nation of priests' (Exod. 19: 6) as an imperative to teach the nations of the world the reality of God.⁸³ And at the end of the nineteenth century, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netsiv) claimed that teaching the truth of God to all the nations of the earth is the ultimate purpose of the Sinaitic revelation. Hence for him, God's covenant at Sinai with the Jewish people is the culmination of God's creation of the world, and the book of Exodus is but a continuation of the book of Genesis.⁸⁴

Recent history gives credence to this theological direction. From the second half of the twentieth century until today, the Holocaust has cast an enormous shadow over Western history and philosophy—and it carries substantive theological implications for Jewish theology and covenantal history. It has affected nearly all Jewish religious thinking since 1945 and has stimulated some contemporary Jewish thinkers to develop a positive attitude to Christianity. The two foremost post-Holocaust thinkers who argue for accepting Christianity as a positive spiritual force are Abraham Joshua Heschel and Irving Greenberg. In light of the Nazi experience, they contend that it is not merely possible for Judaism and Christianity to co-operate with each other, it is *essential* that they do so. In his ground-breaking essay 'No Religion is an Island',⁸⁵ Heschel taught that Judaism and Christianity must now be spiritual bulwarks against a godless world that produced the Final Solution and the abandonment of morality. In the context of secularist and postmodern values, the Judaic and Christian spiritual world-views have more commonality than difference, and it would seem that faithful Jews and

⁸² Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Laws of Idolaters', 1: 3; id., *Sefer hamitsvot*, pos. no. 3; id., *Guide of the Perplexed*, iii. 51.

⁸³ Obadiah Seforno on Exod. 19: 6; Samson Raphael Hirsch on Exod. 19: 6. Because Hirsch believed that the fulfilment of God's covenant by spreading the reality of God throughout the world constituted the *telos* of sacred history, he could claim that Christianity (and Islam) 'represented a major step in bringing the world closer to the goal of all history'.

⁸⁴ Naftali Zvi Berlin, *Ha'emek davar*, Introduction to Exodus.

⁸⁵ Reprinted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York, 1996), 235–50.

Christians are natural partners.⁸⁶ Greenberg has gone further still, maintaining that Judaism and Christianity are different dimensions of the same covenant to work for messianic fulfilment and the sanctification of life in human history and culture.⁸⁷

It must be emphasized that although both Heschel and Greenberg accept theological pluralism, each insists that Judaism is true absolutely for Jews and that it is contrary to God's will for Jews to cross the line to Christianity. Conflating their theological pluralism with any philosophical relativism that mocks religious truth or permanent difference is a logical confusion that both distorts and demeans their thought. Heschel even travelled to the Vatican in September 1965 when Church officials were drafting the initial versions of *Nostra aetate* to insist that there be no hint of Jewish conversion in the document. He emotionally professed to Vatican authorities: 'If faced with the choice of baptism or the crematoria of Auschwitz, I would choose Auschwitz.'⁸⁸

Heschel and Greenberg are frequently seen as visionaries who are far ahead of their communities—a polite yet unmistakably dismissive description. Yet it is not difficult to understand why they see common spiritual ground between Judaism and Christianity, possibly intimating a differentiated role in the same covenantal mission, and why there are compelling reasons for Jews and Christians to rethink their theologies regarding the other and move beyond tolerance to become allies at this point in history. Whereas fifty years ago interfaith co-operation was championed primarily by liberals of tepid religious commitment and minimalist theological conviction, today it is theologically oriented people seeking a coherent conception of God in their lives and transcendent meaning in their ethics who stand to benefit most from this new relationship. This is undoubtedly why a significant number of Orthodox Jewish leaders participate in Jewish–Christian dialogue.⁸⁹ Despite their profound the-

⁸⁶ Even the modern Orthodox rabbinic opinion that officially shuns interfaith theological dialogue understands the importance of co-operation with Christians on social, political, and ethical matters: 'Communication among various faith communities is desirable and even essential. We are ready to enter into dialogue on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, Man's Moral Values, The Threat of Secularism, Technology and Human Values, Civil Rights, etc.' (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbinical Council of America Record for February 1966).

⁸⁷ Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Philadelphia, 2004).

⁸⁸ Judith Hershcopf, *American Jewish Year Book* (New York, 1965), 128; Reuven Kimelman, 'Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish–Christian Relations', *Modern Judaism*, 24 (2004), 255. Greenberg also rejected relativism and sharply distinguished between them logically (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, 196, 201–3, cited by Jospe in Chapter 3, above, pp. 99–100).

⁸⁹ It is noteworthy that individual Orthodox Jews in Israel, Europe, and America comprise a large percentage of those Jews engaged in formal interfaith relations. The Israeli rabbinate has official delegations appointed to hold regular dialogue with the Vatican on political, ethical, scriptural, and religious topics. Also in Israel, the Elijah Institute, headed by the Orthodox academic,

ological differences, traditional Jews and faithful Christians are nearly alone today in Western culture when they assert traditional core moral values.

The 1998 Vatican document *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* indicates this commonality of moral values. The paper asserts that Nazism was a 'neo-pagan' phenomenon, suggesting that neither faithful Christians nor the Catholic faith ('the Church as such') bore direct responsibility for Nazi evil. This is simply wrong. Though Hitler, Himmler, Hess, and other high Nazi officials were baptized Catholics, they were not Christians in any meaningful sense. Yet most of the people who operated the crematoria of Birkenau and implemented the grisly Final Solution were believing Christians. Moreover, the scholarship referred to earlier has demonstrated that traditional Christian anti-Judaic teachings were a substantive factor in the popular Christian acceptance of the Nazi extermination of Jews.

We Remember was correct, however, in stating that Nazism is fundamentally anti-Christian. Nazism violated in the most heinous way the sanctity of human life and rejected the fundamental biblical axiom accepted by Judaism and Christianity alike—that there exists a transcendent God who has authority over human beings. Proclaiming that human power was the ultimate value, Nazism substituted the imperative, 'Murder', for the biblical commandment, 'Thou shall not murder.' This philosophy is the absolute antithesis of both Jewish and Christian ethics and an axiomatic denial of the world-views of both those spiritual traditions. Had Hitler succeeded in completing the destruction of the Jewish people, he would have gone after Christianity and its leadership.⁹⁰ This must be so, because just as there was no way for Nazism to triumph while Jews existed to give testimony to the authority of God and his covenantal ethics, there was no way for Nazism to coexist for any length of time with the deepest spiritual teachings of Christianity.

This common moral axiom of Judaism and Christianity is crucial today Alon Goshen-Gottstein, and the Hartman Institute, headed by Orthodox rabbis David Hartman and Donniel Hartman, have active programmes in interfaith dialogue. Most recently, R. Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat, has launched the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Co-operation, which is designed to promote Judaeo-Christian values and interfaith theological enquiry. In Europe, the United Kingdom's chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, has spoken often to the Church of England, and France's former chief (Orthodox) rabbi, René Sirat, has long been a significant participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue. R. David Rosen is past chairman of the International Jewish Commission on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and Director of Interfaith Affairs, American Jewish Committee. In America, the Orthodox academic Alan Brill has a chair in Jewish-Christian relations at Seton Hall University and I am the American Director of the previously mentioned Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation as well as the director of its Institute for Theological Inquiry.

⁹⁰ Recent scholarship has confirmed this theoretical conclusion (see 'The Nuremberg Project', *Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion* (2002), which reports that documents from Nuremberg trials indicate Nazi plans to destroy Christianity, available at <<http://www.unexplained-mysteries.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=18116>>).

because postmodern secularism has given birth to a pervasive liberal value-orientation whose foundations contain seeds from which destructive forces can again grow. Hedonism drives much of the contemporary ethos. Violence saturates our media and popular culture, sometimes appearing as merely another justified form of pleasure. This contributes to the evisceration of moral concern and the numbing of individual conscience, both essential to securing the values of human welfare and dignity. Moral utilitarianism has also made a comeback in contemporary academia and the high culture of today. In this ethic human life no longer has intrinsic value and individual human life often becomes a mere commodity to be traded and sometimes discarded. This moral philosophy shares the Nazi denial of the Judaeo-Christian ethics that insists that all persons are created in God's image, and hence that each human life possesses infinite sacred value.

Relativism has become one of the most accepted moral theories in our time. Objectivity and moral absolutes are under ferocious attack and are now on the cultural defensive. This implies that there is no objective bar by which to measure human actions, and this easily slips into the belief that there is no bar at all for valid moral judgement. It is but a small step from this conclusion to the denial of ethics entirely. In the political theatre, an aggressive and imperial Islamist monism has emerged as a common threat to Judaism and Christianity. It denies Jewish and Christian legitimacy in the Middle East and by implication tolerance of all religious diversity—even within Islam itself. Finally, irrational religious extremism has become a potent force in both world politics and religious identity. Although the twenty-first century is but quite young, it has already seen too much violence and mass slaughter committed in the name of faith. All these phenomena constitute frightening dangers and are a call to joint action by Christians and Jews, for the Holocaust has taught us that when ethical values do not assume primary importance in human culture, radical evil results.

Can the future between Jews and Christians be better than their painful past? Does Judaism contain the seeds of a theology sympathetic to Christianity, where Christians play a complementary role to the Jewish people as part of God's covenant with Abraham? Will Jews have the courage to nurture, teach, and live this theology? Critical theological differences exist between Judaism and Christianity, yet both faiths demand belief in messianic history, obligating Jews and Christians to trust in the ultimate moral progress of humanity. Each of those religions teaches that their faithful have a common divine task to make the world a better place, where each person possesses sacred value because every person is created in the image of God, where moral values are real, where there is a spiritual centre to the universe, and where every human life is endowed with meaning.

This ideal of moral perfection and religious tolerance is the stunning vision of the prophet Micah:

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever. (Mic. 4: 2–5)

This is the fulfilment of the Jewish covenantal mission and the messianic goal of sacred human history, the repaired world to which Maimonides refers when speaking about Christianity and Islam. For Micah it was indeed possible—perhaps desirable—for different peoples to call God by different names and worship the same Creator of heaven and earth in different modes.

Maimonides offers a fuller messianic vision at the end of his magisterial code of Jewish law, *Mishneh torah*:

At that time, there will be neither hunger, nor war; neither will there be jealousy, nor strife. Blessings will be abundant and comfort within the reach of all. The single preoccupation of the entire world will be to know the Lord. Therefore there will be wise persons who know mysterious and profound things and will attain an understanding of the Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written, ‘The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea’ [Isa. 11: 9].⁹¹

Dare Jews and Christians believe that they can overcome the historical enmity in favour of mutual theological appreciation and religious harmony? If Jews and Christians can become spiritual and physical partners after nearly 2,000 years of religious enmity and physical violence, then peace is possible between any two peoples. That distant possibility is the very stuff of which the messianic dream is made.

⁹¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, ‘Laws of Kings’, 12: 5 (according to the Yemenite manuscript). Most printed texts include the word ‘Israel’ to qualify those who will attain ultimate knowledge of the divine. This qualification is inconsistent with earlier manuscripts (see *Mishneh Torah*, ed. Shabse Frankel (New York, 1998)). It is also inconsistent with the earlier emphasis on the universal nature of messianic blessing: ‘The single preoccupation of the entire world’ (Menachem Kellner, ‘*Farteitsht un Farbessert*: Comments on Tendentious “Corrections” to Maimonidean Texts’, in B. Ish-Shalom (ed.), *In the Paths of Peace: Topics in Jewish Thought in Honor of Shalom Rosenberg* [Bedarkhei shalom: iyunim behagut yehudit mugashim leshalom rosenberg] (Jerusalem, 2006), 255–63; Eng trans.: Joel Linsider and Menachem Kellner, ‘*Farteicht un Farbeserrert* (On Correcting Maimonides)’, *Meorot*, 6/2 (2007), <www.yctora.org/content/view/330/10/>).