

On the Complementarity of Judaism and Christianity

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I. Introduction

I write as a Jew who has come to see the Jewish and Christian religious movements as complementary, at least as each may be ideally envisioned. Such complementarity, it must be said immediately, does not in any way entail the supersession of Judaism or the negation of Judaism. It does not at all imply that Jews should abandon Judaism. On the contrary, rightly seen it can lead to a greater affirmation of Judaism and of the teachings at Judaism's core.

The following essay is my endeavor to indicate the nature of this complementarity, and to argue that its recognition can help further and deepen the spiritual missions of *both* traditions.

II. Metaphysical Mystery

We live in the context of mystery. This is one of the first things to note when one starts to think about religion. Human beings do not know the ultimate truth about the fundamental nature of reality. Nevertheless, we have a strong drive to orient ourselves to it. It is just for this reason that religion operates in the domain of faith rather than knowledge. In faith we struggle to orient ourselves to the ultimate good, even though we cannot know with any great degree of certainty or precision that our orientation is correct.

As a result, religious doctrine is by its very nature a fuzzy thing. It does not, cannot, and *should* not have, nor be taken to have, the precision of, say, statements in the physical sciences. Fundamentalism and fanaticism result when we forget this, when we cling to the practices of our religion, or the doctrinal formulations of our religion, as if those particular practices and formulations are themselves sacrosanct. These practices and doctrines evolve over time, they

change and vary even within the same religious tradition, and they take different shapes in different cultures. If we cling to them as absolute we cannot but end in conflict with one another. Such elevation of the finite, conditioned, and particular to the status of divinity is one of the meanings of idolatry.

In this regard, there is a famous statement in Buddhism that we would do well to bear in mind. It states: “The Buddha is a finger pointing to the moon. Don’t mistake the finger for the moon.” We can extend this to all religious doctrine, ritual, and practice: “Religion is a finger pointing to the moon. Let’s be careful not to mistake the finger for the moon.”

III. Religious Language

This, then, tells us something about the nature of religious language and how we must interpret it. Religious language is not to be taken as absolute. Religion employs metaphor, symbol, figures of speech, poetic imagery, paradox, irony, etc., in order to invoke and evoke the spiritual meanings it seeks to convey. We can think of this by analogy with great fiction. Great fiction tells us a story that is not literally true in order to say something that *is* true about the human condition. If we wish to state precisely what the story intends to convey we can do so by rendering the story’s meaning into more straightforward, abstract, language. This is by no means a worthless endeavor. It can help open up the meaning to us in profound ways. Still, it is no substitute for the story itself. The story does more than the abstract interpretation of the story. It draws us in, often moves us at a visceral level, and thereby helps us *feel* the meaning in a way that a mere abstract rendering will not. Often, the story *as a story together with* the more abstract interpretation can be meaningful in ways that neither can be alone.

The same is true of religious language. What does it mean to say that Jesus is the ‘Son of God’? Taken literally the statement has virtually no meaning at all. The word ‘son’ comes from human biological relationships. God is non-corporeal. God cannot have a biological offspring in the way a human being can. The phrase ‘Son of God’ here is being used as a metaphor, a token for something else. Before one can even meaningfully ask the question of whether Judaism and Christianity are essentially at odds one would have to interpret the metaphor. And, of course, some ways of interpreting it might well make agreement more difficult than others.

In my view the *best* way of interpreting fundamental Jewish and Christian doctrine leads to a recognition that the two traditions are not only *not* irreconcilable, but are in fact complementary. What makes these the *best* ways? They come closest to evoking and invoking the spiritual truths that *both* traditions wish to convey.

IV. The Paradox of Jews as a ‘People’

There is a paradox, even a tension, at the heart of Judaism as a religion and Jews as a distinct ‘people.’ The paradox is that at the core of Jewish identity is a commitment to that which *transcends* Jewish identity. Jews are not supposed to be devoted to themselves as Jews but to God as One. It is just this commitment that originally distinguished them from others: “Hear O Israel! The Lord thy God, the Lord is *One*. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deut. 6:4-5, my emphasis).

The irony, the paradox, is that, according to the Jewish religion, Jews are special as, precisely, that people that does not insist on its specialness. Jews are not to be committed to their specialness but to God, the God of all. That’s what *makes* them special. Other nations are devoted to themselves, their own power, their own glory, their own prowess. Jews are special as

that people to whom the truth that there is One God over *all* people has been bequeathed. Jews are to be devoted to this God of *all*, not to Judaism as such. When Jews forget this they lose the very thing that distinguishes them as Jews; in the name of their ‘specialness’ they lose the very thing that *makes* them special.

In Exodus God says to the Israelites: “The whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:4). What does it mean to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation”? Priests mediate between others and God. Holy people live in close accord with God. *Unlike* every other nation that pursues its own power and interests, Jews are to devote themselves to the God of all, proclaim the God of all, reveal the God of all to all people. This is the *mission* of Judaism.

In the Jewish prayer book there is a prayer entitled *Hatzi Kadish*: “May God’s name be exalted and hallowed throughout the world He created, as is God’s wish. May God’s sovereignty soon be accepted, during our lifetime and the life of all Israel.”

What exactly is this supposed to mean? Is it a prayer that all people convert to Judaism? Must all people abide by the Jewish dietary laws, wear tefillin, eat gefilte fish? Are all to become *ritually* Jewish, *culturally* Jewish?

Clearly not. But if not, then this prayer can only be fulfilled by a religious movement that honors what is essential to the God of *all* but distinguishes itself from what is culturally and ritually specific to Jews and Judaism. What would such a religion look like? First of all, it would give up the ritualistic particularities that distinguish Judaism as a national practice while emphasizing the spirit and morality (i.e., the *universal* essence) of the God of all. Next, as a religion open to all the cultures of the world, absorbing all the cultures of the world, it would naturally integrate traditions and verbal formulations that arise from non-Jewish ways of thinking

and speaking – while reshaping and reinterpreting them so as to make them point to the One God.

This is just what we see in Christianity. Christianity, properly understood, extends the core of the Jewish understanding of God to the rest of the world. The conclusion?: Christianity is a necessary offshoot of Judaism, made necessary by the inherent mission of Judaism itself, as that religion that both worships, and reveals to the rest of the world, the God of *all*.

Indeed, one might paraphrase Voltaire and say: If Christianity didn't exist, Judaism would have to invent it.

But then one remembers: Judaism *did* invent it!

V. The Heart of Judaism and Christianity

So, Christianity extends the revelation of the One God, originally bequeathed to the nation of Israel, to the world at large. In doing so it does not replace Judaism, or 'supersede' Judaism, or override Judaism, it fulfills one of Judaism's important missions. And we must remember that, at least at the outset, it was *Jews* who did this. Jesus was a Jew. Peter was a Jew. Paul was a Jew. Christianity, in its origin, is Jewish. I would say that it is Jewish in its essence as well. Or, to put it another and better way, the heart of Judaism and the heart of Christianity are – *ideally* – the same.

But what is to be understood by 'ideally'? Religions, we remember, are fingers pointing to the moon. Sometimes they point more effectively, more directly, more unambiguously, than at other times. Religious movements are not monolithic or frozen. They shift, they grow, they change over time, they make mistakes, they correct their mistakes, they make new mistakes. This is not just my observation. It is a view integral to the prophetic tradition of Judaism itself. The prophets

of the Hebrew Bible are continuously calling the Jews back to a better, purer, truer understanding of their own tradition.

When I say that the heart of Judaism and Christianity are – ideally – the same, I mean that when both point to God in the manner *most true* to each they coalesce in their essence. It goes without saying (or should) that Christian anti-Semitism is a violation of the Christian commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Christianity as an historical institution has often, tragically, diverged from its *ideal*. But I believe that when each tradition reflects its ideal they are, in essence, pointing to the same truths. And I believe that they can each be *helped* to better reflect these truths by recognizing this about one another.

What is this ideal? At the heart of both Judaism and Christianity are two interrelated notions: The first is that the diversity of our world is bound together by an overarching and undergirding unity (God) whose spiritual dimension is love, and whose socio-spiritual expression is a call for relationships of love and justice among all human beings. The second is that individual human beings reach their highest potential as ‘images of God’ by bringing their will, their desires, and their dispositions into alignment with this love of God.

In the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, writing about Jewish spirituality: “The heart must be filled with love for all. The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all mankind, and then follows the love for the Jewish people, in which all other loves are included, since it is the destiny of the Jews to serve toward the perfection of all things” (from *The Moral Principles*, in *Abraham Isaac Kook, Classics of Western Spirituality*, 135).

VI. Christ

It is in this light that we may interpret the meaning of Christ. The word ‘Christ’ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew for ‘Messiah.’ The Christian idea of Christ, then, involves an interpretation of the Jewish idea of Messiah. This idea is of a great and holy King, sent by God, who will *somehow* initiate a reign of peace, love, and justice on earth. Everything now depends on how we interpret the ‘somehow.’ This reign of peace, love, and justice requires the willful participation of the people who are to live under it; it cannot be brought about through supernatural force for this would violate the freedom and dignity of those on whom it is imposed. It requires a transformation of the human heart and mind. The Messiah, thus, cannot simply impose his will upon the world – all he can do is show the way and invite others to follow.

Thus, in Isaiah we read of the Messiah:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor; and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (Is. 11:1-4).

The Messiah is to “kill the wicked,” not with lethal weapons, but with the “breath of his lips,” i.e., through persuasion and conversion. He is, thereby, to initiate an age in which people follow God, not in fearful obedience, but in joyful understanding, because the law of God will no longer be experienced as an imposition from without, but will have been “written on the heart.”

This is what we read in Jeremiah as well:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after

those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I shall be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," says the Lord; "for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."
(Jer. 31:31-34).

In essence, the Christian idea of the Christ has its scriptural basis in these two passages from the Hebrew Bible. The Christ is, at once, the great King who fights wickedness with "the breath of his lips" – i.e., through an exalted teaching – *and* a paradigm of the God-infused human being who has the law of God "written on his heart." As such, Christ *shows the way* to the messianic kingdom; i.e., to a time when "they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Jews will sometimes say that Jesus cannot have been the Messiah because the messianic age has not yet arrived. But the coming of the messianic age is, and must be, a work in progress, for it requires a transformation of heart and mind (a *metanoia*) of humankind as a whole (not just Jews).

If we understand the messianic age to be God's ultimate goal for humanity, then we may note a remarkable trajectory evident within Hebrew and Christian scripture taken together: This messianic project is begun with God's call to the single individual Abraham, it is then elaborated upon and extended to the Hebrew people as a whole through the revelation at Sinai, it is then elaborated upon and extended again, this time to humanity at large, through Christ and the Christian movement. This last does not entail a negation of Judaism or a supersession of Judaism, it is the furtherance of Judaism's essential mission – its mission, in Rabbi Kook's words, to "serve toward the perfection of all things."

It should be relatively easy – in principle anyway – for Jews to affirm this. It is through Christianity that the God worshiped by the Jews has come to be worshipped by people and peoples the world over. It is through Christianity that the Hebrew Bible is one of the best known books of all time. It is through Christianity that every schoolchild knows of the Ten Commandments, and Moses, and Abraham, and Adam and Eve, etc. That people should “love their neighbors as themselves,” that they should “love God with all their heart, mind, and soul,” – these teachings of Hebrew Scripture have gained universal currency, have replaced paganism, through Christianity, or perhaps we might better say, through the outgrowth and extension of *Judaism we call Christianity*. All of this is *confirmatory* of the Jewish claim that the God of the Jews is not *merely* the God of the Jews, but of the entire world. Indeed, given this claim, how could it have been otherwise? Who could reasonably suppose that such a God would be content to be confined to relationship with only one people? And this leads us to a great irony: Christianity, rightly understood, proves to be an extraordinary *confirmation* of Judaism.

VII. Christ as ‘Son of God’ and ‘Divine’

But, it will be said, Christianity violates a fundamental tenet of Judaism by identifying a human being, Jesus, with God. To identify a finite thing or person with God is idolatry. Idolatry is considered a great sin in Judaism. So surely we have here an insurmountable conflict.

Yes and no. We must now return to an earlier point made about religious language. God is a mystery that cannot be expressed precisely in language. The *Tao Te Ching* begins with the line: “Tao called Tao is not Tao.” What is meant is that any verbal expression for the ultimate truth is going to miss it due to the limitations of human language and human cognition. Human ways of speaking about the divine are culturally specific and evolve over time. They are *all* inadequate. I

think it likely that if the early ‘Jesus movement’ had remained within Judaism itself it would not have employed the notion of the actual divinity of Jesus. As it is, the notion that there can be sons and daughters of gods was a common one in the pagan world to which Judaism, *as Christianity*, spread. What we see in the Christian movement is not so much the application of this pagan idea to the idea of the Messiah as the *transformation* of this pagan idea through an application of the messianic idea to *it*.

According to the formulation finally settled upon in Christianity Jesus is not *simply* divine. He is *not* like a pagan god or demi-god. He is rather *fully* human and *fully* divine. He is *fully both*. This is an idea that has no precedent in either paganism or Judaism. It seems, or can seem, impossibly paradoxical. And, of course, it is a *verbal formulation* – which is to say, it is an ultimately inadequate way of expressing something true about divinity and, in this case, about the ideal relationship between divinity and humanity. It demands interpretation.

It might be interpreted in any number of ways. In my view the best interpretation, the one most consonant with the truths of Judaism *and* Christianity, is that Christ, as fully human and fully divine, reveals the possibility of a profound *intimacy* between the human and the divine, the possibility that the divine reality, the divine spirit (the Holy Spirit), can reside in the heart of a human person – that, indeed, this divine-human partnership, revealed in Jesus as the Christ, is the culmination of human potentiality; it is the human being fully realized as ‘image of God.’

To quote Rabbi Kook again: “The highest of all loves is the love of God, which is love in its fullest maturing. This love is not intended for any derivative ends; when it fills the human heart, this itself spells man’s greatest happiness.”

Christ is a revelation of the human being whose heart is fully imbued with the love of God; not only the love *for* God, but the love that *is* God. This (not simple obedience to divine law) is

the ultimate aim of religious practice. Thus Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me” (Jn. 14:6).

What this means – *what it should be taken to mean* – is that Jesus (as Christ) reveals the way human beings *are to be* in order to realize their potential as “images of God.”

Understood in this way Jesus is not metaphysically unique. Rather, he reveals a possibility open to us all.

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner advances this interpretation: “This union [of God and Man in Jesus] is distinguished from our grace not by what has been offered in it, which in both instances, including that of Jesus, is grace. It is distinguished rather by the fact that Jesus is the offer for us, and we ourselves are not once again the offer, but the recipients of God's offer to us” (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, 202).

Interpreted in this way, the problem of idolatry is resolved. There are basically two problems with idolatry: the first is that the association of some finite thing with God robs God of God’s transcendence. God cannot be the *unity* overarching and undergirding the *diversity* of the world if God is but one finite element within the world. Thus idolatry is a problem because it *reduces* God to something finite. The second problem is the reverse. Idolatry *elevates* something finite to the status of God, which lends it excessive and inappropriate authority. This can lead to tyranny, fanaticism, or just simple superstition.

But the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation – rightly understood – does not present such problems. In the Christian doctrine God is not reduced to the finite Jesus. Rather *God the Father* remains transcendent, as the unity overarching and undergirding the diversity of the finite world. Nor is the finite Jesus – properly understood – elevated to a position of tyrannical authority. Jesus is presented as a *transparency* to the Father. He says, “When a man believes in me, he does

not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me” (Jn. 12:44-45, my emphasis).

In his finite lifetime, Jesus is depicted as weak, poor, and finally overpowered by the tyrannical forces of the world. His entire authority lies in the way he points beyond himself to the God of all. “My kingdom,” he says to Pontius Pilate, “is not of this world” (Jn. 17:36). Thus, rightly understood, Christian doctrine is not idolatrous.

But what is to guarantee that it will be rightly understood? It is just here that Judaism can offer something of great worth to Christianity. The Jewish tradition of wresting and wrangling with the sacred text, of arguing with God – as we see in Abraham’s negotiations over Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn. 18:16-33), and Moses’ pleas for the children of Israel at Sinai (Nm. 13:11-20) – exemplify the Jewish notion that God’s rightful authority lies in God’s love and justice, not in God’s power *per se*. From this perspective, justice and love are values of ultimate sanctity to which even God may be – even must be – called to account should he appear to stray.

This Jewish emphasis on the ethical dimension of the divine lies at the very heart of Jesus’ teachings as well. In this respect, Jesus is a Jew *par excellence*; his teaching a striking expression and extension of the Jewish prophetic tradition. Had Jews not been alienated from the Christian movement that emerged from them they themselves might have played a key role in keeping this emphasis in the forefront. I believe they may still play this role; that the breaking down of the barriers between Christianity and Judaism can help to heal and revitalize *both*.

VIII. Christian Anti-Semitism and the Problem of Jewish Identity

One of the great fears many Jews have with respect to Christianity is that, if they lower the barriers they have built against the Christian religion and Christian doctrine, they will be

overwhelmed by Christianity and assimilated into it. Eventually there will be no more Judaism and no more Jews. It is yet another irony of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism that it is precisely because of the *closeness* of Jewish and Christian doctrine that Jews feel threatened by it. Given this closeness, how shall they differentiate themselves? If they cannot differentiate themselves, what will become of them? Will this great and noble people, who have contributed so much to the world and survived so many calamities, go down (in the words of T.S. Elliot) ‘not with a bang, but with a whimper’? Will they simply fade away as they meld into the Christian world?

My answer, simply, is no. The fact that both Irish and Italians are Catholic does not make the Irish Italian or the Italian Irish. The Jewish people have a national-ethnic-cultural-religious identity and heritage with its own distinctive history, holidays, cultural expressions, languages, stories, songs, etc. The Jewish religion, which is, of course, part of this heritage, would only be made stronger (not weaker) if Jews were to acknowledge and affirm their extraordinary contribution to, and connection with, the religiosity of the Christian-gentile world. There is no reason on earth (nor elsewhere) for Jews to abandon their sense of distinct peoplehood, nor for Jews to cease to relate to the One God in their own distinctive manner, through the following of hallakah, the observance of Jewish holidays, the study of Torah and Talmud, the recital of Jewish prayers, etc. But Judaism would be made *richer* through an acknowledgement of its association with Christianity, as that religious movement through which the God of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” has come to be known to the rest of the world. The irony, again, is that such an acknowledgement would provide a validation of Judaism itself. Christianity (ironically!) is the single greatest ‘proof’ that the God revealed to the Jews at Sinai has universal import and meaning.

That Jews have trouble seeing this is no doubt a legacy of the long and tragic history of Christian anti-Semitism, during which Christians sought to blot out Jews and Judaism in the ‘name of Christ.’ All we can say about this is that it reflects a tragic, and horrific, misunderstanding of Christ’s message on the part of Christians themselves. In response Jews developed a defensive insularity that has become all but institutionalized. Jews cannot be blamed for this. Faced with the option of either rejecting an oppressive version of Christianity or abandoning their own rich heritage they rightly chose the former. Still, this insularity is at odds with the universal vision at the heart of Judaism, and, thus, distorts it. Jews are to proclaim the essential unity of all humankind, they are not to be narcissistically, or defensively, closed in on themselves.

Many if not most Christians have now seen the error of Christian supersessionist doctrine. God’s Oneness does not entail a demand for religious homogeneity nor religious hegemony, but religious inclusivity. God’s Oneness comprehends and transcends the rich diversity of people and peoples, it does not override it.

An essential message of *both* the Jewish and Christian religion is that Jews and Christians (and all other people) are to exist in underlying solidarity as children of the One God. It is time for the artificial and destructive estrangement between Jews and Christians to come to an end, and for both to acknowledge their fundamental affinity as worshipers of the same God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, *and* Jesus.