

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

**A Time to Deconstruct:
Refining the Work of Jewish-Christian Engagement**

Beatrice Lawrence, Seattle University

Theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology are related topics within the greater study of religion. Such theologies seek to examine how it is possible to study multiple religious traditions, while remaining a member of one specific tradition. Seminal works in this field reveal great strides taken in inter-religious engagement, particularly in the context of Jewish-Christian relationships. This is especially evident in the assertion that antisemitism is incompatible with Christian theology and ethics. Yet, the leading works in these fields have been predominantly written by Christian scholars such as Alan Race, John Hick, John Cobb, Jaques Dupuis, Paul Knitter, Mark Heim, Frank Clooney, John Thatamanil, Jeanine Hill Fletcher, and Catherine Cornille.¹ The realization of this fact is significant: the presuppositions, categories, and questions associated with this work were (and are) greatly shaped by and understood through Christian lenses. That is, the way approaches to religious pluralism have developed

¹ Though works written by scholars of non-Christian religious traditions have entered the field (such as those by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, John Makransky, and Alan Brill), the majority of scholars doing this work are still Christian-identified. Anecdotally, my own cohort for the Luce Summer Seminar in Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology reflected this reality: the cohort comprised a dozen Christians, 3 Jews, 1 Muslim, 1 Buddhist, and 1 Hindu during the first year. At the second meeting of the cohort, the Hindu scholar was not able to be present, leaving us to read and discuss Hindu texts without the perspective of a self-identified Hindu. I believe that this unbalanced demographic was not the fault of the organizers, who earnestly sought to include scholars from various religious traditions in our work; rather, I think it is a testament to the fact that this is a field still dominated by Christianity.

often demonstrates a Christian-centric worldview and hermeneutics.

A Christian hermeneutical bias is an important topic for analysis among scholars working in theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology, and each participant in the development of these fields must address the issue from his or her own religious identity and specialty. However, and in spite of important developments, the problem is uniquely complicated in the context of Christian-Jewish engagement. In this context, a Christian-centric worldview and interpretive bias obscure and distort the conversations that take place in important ways that can have dire consequences. Persecution of Jews for much of the last two thousand years, often committed in the name of Christianity and/or with the authority of the Church, places a burden on this encounter; though the past several decades have witnessed an improvement in these relations, understandably, distrust and suspicion on the part of Jews can still play a role. The particular relationship between Christianity and Judaism has not always been marked by equality and intersubjectivity. In addition, Judaism is not a religion like other religions: people who identify themselves as Jewish do so for a variety of reasons. Jewish identity is rooted in history, family lines, traditions, and numerous other factors not necessarily reflective of religious belief. As a result, this particular group of people is difficult to engage and understand by many Christians interested in this work.

I believe that it is time for the proverbial “next step” in the work of Christian-Jewish engagement, well aware that this step is only possible because of the profound advancements of the last fifty years. This engagement takes place in the academy, among friends and neighbors, and through religious teachings promulgated by clergy. Multiple Christian denominational groups have created documents outlining their commitments to new approaches, including numerous papal documents since Vatican II that record an unfolding conversation about many of the problems that plague Christian-Jewish relations. It is a blessing that we have arrived at this point in

the development of Christian-Jewish engagement; only because of the hard work of the last several decades, as well as the good faith evident among participants, is it possible for me to present the arguments contained herein.

I propose a few critiques of certain aspects of recent and contemporary Christian approaches to Judaism. My emphasis throughout this article is on theologies of religious pluralism instead of comparative theology. As the direct practice of engaging religious “Others,” comparative theology is dependent on theologies of religious pluralism for its hermeneutical frameworks. Though some scholars have recently argued that comparative work is more helpful as a method of intercommunity engagement, their own approaches belie the difficulties of “doing” comparative theology than is informed by problematic approaches to religious pluralism.² My critiques are intended to support honest and fruitful conversation between two communities whose relationship has been mostly troubled for two thousand years. In order to foster engagement that is viable, in which all participants are respected and can demonstrate authenticity, we must first deconstruct what does not work. With this goal in mind, I will address some of the ideas and methodologies that require deconstruction, and suggest topics of inquiry to guide the conversation moving forward. I offer this in the spirit of James L. Fredericks’ “interreligious friendships,” and hope that these questions can be raised in the contexts of people working together with a spirit of cooperation and respect.³

² James L. Fredericks finds CT to be superior to TRP, because it involves “the interpretation of the meaning and truth of one’s own faith by means of a critical investigation of other faiths,” consequently recognizing the subjectivity of the participants and creating the opportunity for self-critique. Yet, Fredericks reveals perspectives rooted in problematic Christian approaches to Judaism, including but not limited to the idea that Judaism and Christianity are closely linked. For discussion of the pitfalls of such a perspective, see the discussion below. James L. Fredericks, “Introduction,” pp. XXXX in Francis S. Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London: T & T Clark International, 2010), ix.

³ Fredericks, xi, n. 5.

1. Basic models in Theologies of Religious Pluralism

The central models that characterize theologies of religious pluralism historically and today, codified initially by Race and Hick, appear in most seminal works. Definitions for each model vary among scholars, but these basic approaches form an underlying vocabulary that informs this kind of scholarship.⁴

- **Exclusivism:** Paul Hedges helpfully defines exclusivism in the plural: “exclusivisms are the range of beliefs that say only Christianity leads to salvation and that, generally, anyone who adheres to a different religion must therefore be going to damnation.”⁵ He notes that there is diversity within exclusivisms, which Paul Knitter identifies as the multi-layered “replacement model,” marked by the belief in “only one true religion.”⁶ The ultimate thrust of the position is simple: “In the final analysis, Christianity is meant to replace all other religions.”⁷ Knitter divides this approach into two forms: total replacement and partial replacement; the former presents a highly negative view of other religions, while the latter allows for the presence of God in other religions, but not the possibility of salvation.⁸ Knitter notes that many Christians, even those who espouse this view, are often uncomfortable with the idea

⁴ Among foundational works in TRP employing this typology we find: Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987); Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 1983.

⁵ Hedges, 20.

⁶ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 19-60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-33.

that God would punish unbelievers without mercy. He presents a few common solutions to that quandary, including eschatological expectations of mass conversion, opportunities to convert after death, and the belief that Christ's saving grace applies to all people—even those who have not accepted it.⁹

- **Inclusivism:** One version of inclusivism, encapsulated especially in Knitter's work, is the belief that one religion is most true, but other religions have something to contribute to an understanding of God and of Christianity. Knitter terms it "The Fulfillment Model," in which "The One Fulfills the Many"; most scholars reference Karl Rahner in this particular method through his notion of "anonymous Christians."¹⁰ The central belief is that we all benefit in some way from Christianity (which is the most true of the world's religions), and we can all contribute to Christians' self-understanding. Race and Hedges define inclusivism somewhat differently, as "(1) the commitment to Christ as the unique and normative revelation of God, and (2) God's universal salvific will."¹¹ In this formulation, the "rightness" of Christianity is retained but its partner is the belief in God's love for all of humankind.

- **Universalism/Pluralism:** The typology used by Dupuis, Knitter, Hick, and Hedges does not include a specific category named "universalism," but instead describes "pluralistic" approaches. These two perspectives are, in fact, quite linked. Both are characterized by an emphasis on a reality that transcends all contemporary forms of religion, one which all people are trying to understand, albeit through varying paths. Hick's

⁹ This particular approach to the problem of discomfort with mass damnation approaches the concept of inclusivism as it is represented in other scholars' work.

¹⁰ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 63-106, ; Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 22 volumes, Cornelius Ernst, et al., trans. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965-1991). See also the analysis of Rahner's ideas in Ronald Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 203-241.

¹¹ Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges, *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (SCM Press: London, 2008), 63.

formulation has served as the basis for most subsequent discussions of this approach. After noting that people of non-Christian faiths “are in general no less kindly, honest, thoughtful for others, no less truthful, honourable, loving and compassionate, than are in general our Christian fellow citizens,”¹² he argues that “the ultimate ineffable Reality is capable of being authentically experienced in terms of different sets of human concepts.”¹³ Hedges defines the approach simply as the suggestion that “there is more than one legitimate way to what can broadly be termed ‘salvation.’”¹⁴ Knitter unpacks this approach (which he calls “The Mutuality Model”) with greater detail, articulating three guiding questions, and three “bridges” that can be used to develop pluralistic theologies.¹⁵ These questions concern the desire to engage in “more authentic dialogue” which functions as a real conversation: the commitment to listening as well as talking; the necessity for establishing a “level playing field” in which “equals” can come to the proverbial table; and the opportunity to use this approach to “come to a clearer understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness that will sustain the dialogue.”¹⁶ The “bridges” he proposes are philosophical-historical (appealing to the admission of limitations in human understanding); religious-mystical (involving direct experiences of the divine coupled with a sense of ineffability); and ethical-practical (using the social justice elements of each tradition to attend to the suffering of human communities, together).¹⁷

- Particularism: Though Hick has had a profound impact on theologies of religious pluralism and its approaches to the reality of multiple traditions, many argue that he is too focused on shared aspects of these traditions, leaving little room for exploration of significant differences. Several recent works in this field have suggested a new approach, which proposes “indeterminacy in relation to other religions, alongside a

¹² Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ Hedges, 26.

¹⁵ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 109-169.

¹⁶ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 109-111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

commitment to speaking from, for and of one tradition.”¹⁸ The emphasis is on “alterity,” although Hedges still formulates his approach with some universalistic tendencies.¹⁹ Knitter, on the other hand, refers to this as the “Acceptance Model,” subtitled it “Many True Religions, So Be It,” and “Making Peace with Radical Difference.”²⁰ He argues that this approach must be based in postmodern sensibilities, and refers to the work of George Lindbeck and S. Mark Heim as examples of this methodology.²¹ He advocates an admission of the potential for no common ground, and refutes the appropriateness of apologetics.²² Members of various traditions have the right to represent themselves authentically, without any attempt to be “more palatable” to their conversation partners.

The scholars who have described and explored the perspectives named here have, for the most part, been clear that they are each speaking as Christians, to Christians. Yet, these approaches have an impact on the non-Christian players in this work because of the questions and approaches that are applied to intercommunity engagement. Despite the nuances several scholars have introduced into these paradigms, the categories retain some unique problems within the Christian-Jewish context.

- *Exclusivism* characterizes the approach most Christian communities have had toward Judaism for much of the last two thousand years. The result of this mindset has historically been direct proselytizing, forced conversions, and violence.

¹⁸ Hedges, 27.

¹⁹ “3) the Holy Spirit may be at work in other faiths, requiring them to be regarded with respect and dignity; 4) no salvific potency resides in other faiths, though they are somehow involved in God’s plans for humanity but in ways we cannot know;...6) the orthodox doctrines of Trinity and Christ are grounding points for which to approach other faiths.” Hedges, 27-28.

²⁰ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 173-237.

²¹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984); S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

²² Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 177.

Thankfully, most people engaged in theologies of religious pluralism have abandoned this as a healthy or useful approach, though it sometimes creeps, insidiously, into some works. Nor is this category of thought completely absent from the articulated goals of particular Christian groups. Knitter notes that a significant number of contemporary Christian communities continue to adhere to this view.²³

- *Inclusivism* may appear to be gracious and accepting, but it is also a refutation of the truth claims of other communities; it is triumphalist in its assertion that “I am most right,” and it is patronizing in that it self-righteously “permits” others to be embraced and saved even if they are not committed to the “true” faith.
- *Universalism* and *pluralism* can serve to unseat assumptions about the validity of rigid and exclusivist truth claims, because in fact *no one* has sole claim to the truth, but it also undercuts the truth claims of other communities. In other words, if one community approaches another and says, “none of us is fully right, and the real truth is beyond us all,” there is *still* the assertion that the latter community *is not right*. That is not an assertion that one community can make for another. Avi Sagi states well the critique that applies to this model:

Its main drawback is that it belies the world of the believers themselves, who do not view God as a product of their imagination.... [It] fails to take into account the datum to which it relates... Although expressive plural-

²³ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 22. Some methods of proselytizing are not overt: The Southern Baptist Convention prays for non-believers (specifically Jews, according to their 1999 convention) to find Christ, and some members of the Mormon Church posthumously baptize Jews (even Holocaust survivors). Other attempts are more extreme. As a child, I was consistently confronted by strangers forcibly handing me the New Testament outside my public schools; I was called a “Christ-killer” and told that I would be damned if I did not convert. These are only anecdotes, but I believe they reveal an American religious culture that still bears the hallmark of Christian exclusivism.

ism is possible, the question is whether it is useful: it seems in no way helpful to believers, and is superfluous to non-believers.²⁴

The models discussed here are also problematic in the context of Christian-Jewish engagement because of the nature of Jewish approaches to religious pluralism.²⁵ Judaism is a particularistic tradition. By the early post-biblical era, Jews had mostly forsaken attempts to proselytize.²⁶ In the Mishnah we see the development of ritual elements that actually make conversion to Judaism more difficult.²⁷ Especially since the 3rd c. CE, Judaism has not been a religion of outreach. It developed internally, with a flowering of texts, hermeneutics, practices, and traditions. David Shatz describes the central TRP of Judaism as: “live and let live.”²⁸ This is a generalization, but it is, on the whole, an accurate one. Christ and Christian ideas appear in some Jewish texts, historically and today, but are relatively

²⁴ Avi Sagi, “Justifying Interreligious Pluralism,” in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, Alon-Goshen Gottstein and Eugene Korn, eds. (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 79-80.

²⁵ There are Jewish scholars whose works demonstrate some of the same problems described here. These include contributors to Goshen-Gottstein’s volume, the writers of “Dabru Emet” (a Jewish statement on Jewish-Christian relations published in the *New York Times*, September 10, 2000), and Abraham Joshua Heschel, who advocates universalism that excludes secular Jews, and whose essay “No Religion is an Island” belies many of the pitfalls discussed here. These works merit analysis in the context of another scholarly article. For the full text of Dabru Emet, go to https://www.bc.edu/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/jewish/dabru_emet.htm. See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 235-249.

²⁶ For further discussion on this issue, see Bernard J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (New York: KTAV, 1939).

²⁷ See, for example, the lengthy examinations of rabbinic conversion rituals throughout Shaye Cohen’s definitive work *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

²⁸ David Shatz, “Morality, Liberalism, and Interfaith Dialogue,” in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations: In Honor of David Berger*, Elishevah Carlebach and Jacob J. Schachter, eds. (Boston: Brill, 2012), 497.

insignificant for Jews examining their *own* tradition. When my students ask me, “What do Jews think about Jesus?” I usually answer, “not often.”²⁹ Eugene Korn expresses this idea well in his response to a speech by Cardinal Koch on Jewish-Christian relations in 2011:³⁰

Judaism is ‘intrinsic’ to Christianity but Christianity holds no such essential relationship to Judaism. Most Jews believe that they can come to a coherent theological understanding of Judaism without encountering Christianity at all. Hence, there is a greater need to supply reasons to Jews for pursuing a rich Jewish-Christian encounter than there is for knowledgeable and theologically sophisticated Christians...Thus, whereas our joint encounter is urgent for Christians, it seems not so for Jews.³¹

²⁹ There are Jewish texts—ancient and modern—about Jesus and Christianity. However, these texts usually reflect a reaction against Christian proselytizing or persecution of Jews. More recent works engaging Jesus as a Jewish man and the New Testament as Jewish literature reflect the adoption of new models of engaging with the religious “Other,” and as such, should be evaluated separately on their merits within the context of this growing dialogue. Overall, however, Jews and Jewish texts have not historically demonstrated great interest in examining Christology. Scholarship on this issue includes but is not limited to: Amy Jill-Levine and Mark Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash: Augmented edition* (Jersey City, N.J.: KTAV, 2007); E.P Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985); Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2012); Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus Christ in the Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, and the Liturgy of the Synagogue* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010).

³⁰ Cardinal Kurt Koch, “Keynote Address: Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 7 (2012), 12 pages, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/viewFile/2075/1780>.

³¹ Eugene Korn, “A Jewish Response to ‘Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Catholic Dialogue,’” *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 7 (2012), <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/viewFile/2075/1780>, 2.

Because of these aspects of Jewish thought in relation to religious others, it is difficult to make too strong a case for sizable Jewish participation in Christian models of pluralistic thought.

2. Pitfalls that can arise in works of Christian-Jewish Engagement

Historically, problematic perspectives that emerge from dominant Christian models in theologies of religious pluralism can be categorized as follows:

- **Proselytizing:** directly encouraging or indirectly prioritizing the conversion of Jews to Christianity.
- **Triumphalism and supersessionism:** the belief that Christianity, its texts, and its traditions, have replaced or fulfilled Judaism, and/or are superior to Judaism and its texts and traditions.
- **Essentialization:** the failure to recognize the vast diversity in Jewish communities today in terms of practice and belief, the misunderstanding of Judaism in the 1st c. CE as monolithic, the insistence that 1st c. Judaism is accurately depicted in the gospels, and/or the equation of the Judaism of the late Second Temple period with contemporary Judaism.
- **Utilization:** using Jews and Judaism with imperialistic and colonialist tendencies as a way to enrich Christian faith, as if Judaism were a resource to be mined and not a world of its own.³²
- **Philosemitism:** elevating Jews to special or privileged status, lauding Judaism, and/or equating contemporary Jews with Christ because of Christ's environment in the 1st c. CE; this is

³² Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religious Pluralism*, 206: "the other religious traditions become our roommates as we explore the different levels of the *Christian house*." (emphasis mine)

the flip side of the anti-Semitic coin.³³ This pitfall leads to others: essentialization, obfuscation, objectification of the Jews, etc.

It likely goes without saying that open assertions that Judaism is inferior to Christianity, that Jews are cursed by God, or that Jews should be targeted for proselytizing are no longer prevalent among those working thoughtfully to improve Christian-Jewish relations. Documents promulgated by Christian communities in the last fifty years, especially the last two decades, directly address these approaches. In 2003, the Alliance of Baptists released a statement identifying themselves as “the inheritors...and transmitters” of a theology that has resulted in spiritual and religious violence against the Jews, and proceeded to “confess [the] sins” committed by the church; the document ends with a list of principles designed to prevent those sins from being re-committed.³⁴ The ELCA Church Council has released several documents, among them “Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America to the Jewish Community,” and “Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations,” which decry Martin Luther’s “On the Jews and Their Lies” and build a framework for more beneficial interactions with Jews, emphasizing the Lutheran responsibility to listen.³⁵ The Hebraic Heritage Christian Center took a firm stance against triumphalism and proselytizing in their 2011 statement,

³³ For example, see the discussion of this issue in Eric Michael Reisenauer, “Anti-Jewish Philosemitism: British and Hebrew Affinity and Nineteenth Century British Antisemitism,” *British Scholar* 1 (2008): 79-104.

³⁴ The Alliance of Baptists, “A Statement on Jewish-Christian Relations,” <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na/baptist/710-ab03apr25>, April 25, 2003.

³⁵ ELCA Church Council, “Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America to the Jewish Community,” <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na/lutheran/676-elca94apr18>, April 18, 1994; “Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations,” <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na/lutheran/677-elca98nov16>, November 16, 1998.

“Covenant and Witness.”³⁶ Perhaps most impressive are Catholic documents outlining a lengthy and deep examination of Catholic teachings towards Judaism and Jews, leading back to the deliberations on *Nostra Aetate*. These debates within the Catholic leadership belie a grave concern that the church not appear to advocate proselytizing, nor claim the Jews are guilty of deicide, nor deride Jewish tradition—because of awareness of the evils that have resulted from these viewpoints, and because of a clear concern that Jewish partners engaged in dialogue feel respected.³⁷ With few exceptions,³⁸ the Catholic leadership working on that document and other statements has demonstrated genuine concern to re-create a relationship with Jews based on Christian repentance and respect for Judaism. Subsequent documents, including but not limited to “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document *Nostra Aetate*,” and “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” clearly charge Catholics with the task of studying Judaism, its texts, and its traditions, with Jews.³⁹

³⁶ Hebraic Heritage Christian Center, “Covenant and Witness,” <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na/evangelical/952-hhcc2011may24>, May 24, 2011.

³⁷ Transcripts of the deliberations prior to the release of *Nostra Aetate* are located at <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-debate>.

³⁸ In his statements during pre-*Nostra Aetate* deliberations, Cardinal Ruffini argued that the Talmud teaches Jews to despise humanity and be hostile to Christianity, while Archbishop Pocock and Bishop Arcea demonstrate suppersessionism and the hope that the Jews will recognize Christ as “not the destruction of, but the fulfillment of their own vocation.” These speakers are outliers in the larger argument.

³⁹ Commission For Religious Relations With The Jews, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document *Nostra Aetate*,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19741201_nostra-aetate_en.html, December 1, 1974. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html, 2002.

Yet even the most well-intentioned scholars can fall prey to problematic views of Judaism. Some are evident, while others are much more difficult to detect and, as such, can have an insidious, undermining effect on the relationships participants seek to build. Most of these difficulties fall under three headings: the belief that Judaism and Christianity have a deep familial relationship, supersessionism, and misunderstandings about the complex nature of Jewish identity.

3. The perception that Judaism and Christianity are sibling or parent/child traditions

Multiple documents in the recent history of Christian approaches to Judaism demonstrate heavy dependence upon the belief that Judaism is a sibling of or parent to Christianity, and hence in a way, a part of Christianity. This is particularly evident in some Catholic teachings. At the beginning of section 4 of *Nostra Aetate*, we find the statement that contemporary Christians share the heritage of Abraham and the patriarchs with the Jews. In addition, we find the assertion that “the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people’s exodus from the land of bondage;” later in section 4 we read that Christians and Jews “share a spiritual patrimony.”⁴⁰ In 1986, during a visit to the synagogue of Rome, Pope John Paul II stated: “You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, our elder brothers.”⁴¹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” also consistently makes reference to “the close fraternal bonds” that link the Christian and Jewish people. The use of the term “Judeo-Christian,” which appears in many of these documents, is a problem in

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions: *Nostra Aetate*” http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html, October 28, 1965.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, “Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome,” *Dialogika*: <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/305-jp2-86apr13>, April 13, 1986, Section 4.

and of itself. Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski notes that “Judeo-Christian tradition’ is arguably a supersessionist term in that it reduces the Jewish tradition to those scriptural texts it shares with Christianity, thus implying that Judaism ends with the rise of Christianity.”⁴²

Several underlying beliefs inform this Christian perspective. Among those beliefs we find the opinion that Jesus’ Jewishness forms a basis of connection, as well as the perception that Christianity sprang solely from the loins of Judaism. The presence of the “Old Testament” within the Christian canon is also interpreted as proof of a familial relationship. These perceived connections have motivated hospitable and respectful approaches to Judaism, but there are detriments as well, and aspects of these approaches do not respect Jewish self-understanding.

Many Christian communities have begun to accept and address the fact that Judaism in the first century was marked by radical diversity and debate. Hence “the Jews” depicted in the Gospels are a misrepresentation of actual Second Temple Jewish communities; the use of the rhetorical device of “the Jews” was a component of early Christian polemic and political differentiation from Judaism. Perhaps more importantly, Judaism is not the same, now, as it was in the 1st c. CE. Two thousand years of evolution have created Judaism as it is today, and Christian communities have only begun to study the texts and traditions that emerged in those millennia. Naming Judaism as the mother of Christianity, or calling Christianity the daughter of Judaism, or referring to them as sibling traditions, is a pluralist maneuver (similar to Hick’s form of pluralism) that emphasizes commonality too heavily and erases central points of difference. The fact that the Judaisms of the late 2nd Temple period had an impact on the birth of Christianity says less about contemporary Jews and Christians

⁴² Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Comparative Theology and the Status of Judaism: Hegemony and Reversals,” pp. 89-107 in Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology*, 96.

than some would like to think. In addition, Christianity was significantly shaped by Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy, as well as apocalyptic thought.⁴³ Judaism and Christianity are, today, two very different traditions, and a pattern of emphasizing commonalities and eliding differences can now be identified and rectified.

In that vein, in 1964, Joseph Soloveitchik published an article titled “Confrontation,” in which he argued that Jews should avoid discussing matters of theology with Christians and focus instead on social justice issues.⁴⁴ He put forth stipulations that, in his mind, would be necessary for productive Jewish-Christian engagement of any sort. Before Jews and Christians can come together, he argues that Christians must hear and understand an important component of Jewish self-understanding:

⁴³ The bibliography addressing the rhetorical use of “the Jews” in the New Testament, as well as the Greek/apocalyptic influence on the text, is lengthy and formidable. In particular, see: Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Volume Three: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul’s Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1990); and the work of E. P. Sanders, especially *Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁴⁴ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 6:2 (1964): 5-29. Soloveitchik does, arguably, have a universalistic perspective with the expectation that all will be united in the end times in one faith; however, his critique of the familial relationship between Judaism and Christianity is an important contribution to the deconstruction of this idea. The concern about differentiation between Judaism and Christianity that is present in traditional Jewish texts, Soloveitchik’s work, and the works of many other Jewish thinkers, likely emerges from several realities. Among them we find the fact of a difficult history as a persecuted minority in the larger Christian world, and the resulting desire for survival that requires conscious separation from the majority culture. This is a fact of Judaism’s development and necessarily plays a role in contemporary Jewish-Christian interaction, along with the desire by Jews to be seen as members of a tradition that has unique characteristics not to be elided with any other.

First, we must state, in unequivocal terms, the following. We are a totally independent faith community. We do not revolve as a satellite in any orbit. Nor are we related to any other faith community as “brethren” even though “separated.” People confuse two concepts when they speak of a common tradition uniting two faith communities such as the Christian and the Judaic.⁴⁵

Soloveitchik continues with a statement that well may be addressed directly to those in intercommunity work who make the case that Judaism is valuable because of its role as “the root” of Christianity:

As a faith individuality, the community of the few⁴⁶ is endowed with intrinsic worth which must be viewed against its own meta-historical backdrop without relating to the framework of another faith community. For the mere appraisal of the worth of one community in terms of the service it has rendered to another community, no matter how great and important this service was, constitutes an infringement of the sovereignty and dignity of even the smallest faith communities.⁴⁷

The Rabbinical Council of America attached a statement to Soloveitchik’s article, affirming his demand for respect for Judaism as a unique tradition:

...[E]ach religious community is an individual entity which cannot be merged or equated with a community which is committed to a different faith. Each religious community is endowed with intrinsic dignity and metaphysical worth. Its historical experience, its present dynamics, its hopes and aspirations for the future can only be interpreted in terms of full spiritual independ-

⁴⁵ Soloveitchik, 21-22.

⁴⁶ “The community of the few” is the term Soloveitchik uses to refer to minority groups in general and Jews in particular.

⁴⁷ Soloveitchik, 23.

ence of and freedom from any relatedness to another faith community. Any suggestion that the historical and meta-historical worth of a faith community be viewed against the backdrop of another faith, and the mere hint that a revision of basic historic attitudes is anticipated, are incongruous with the fundamentals of religious liberty and freedom of conscience and can only breed discord and suspicion.⁴⁸

The Rabbinical Council chose Micah 4:5 to end the statement, which reflects a significant form of Jewish TRP: “Let all people walk, each one in the name of his god, and we shall walk in the name of our Lord, our God, forever and ever.” Within several interreligious statements (Jewish and Christian alike) we find this biblical verse employed to express the desire for ultimate unification of humanity within the one, truest faith—in other words, universalism;⁴⁹ however, perhaps more participants in this work should recognize the significance of the final clause: *we* shall walk in the name of *our* Lord. In other words, *we* (the Jews creating these documents) are ultimately committed to living Jewishly, regardless of the opinions of other communities.

Another component of the perceived familial connection between Christianity and Judaism is evident in theological comparisons. In the realm of religious education, the “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document *Nostra Aetate*” support the inclusion of certain central ideas in the education of Catholics, one of which concerns God: “It is the same God, ‘Inspirer and author of the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28-9.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, “CJCUC Statement on a Jewish Understanding of Christians and Christianity,” <http://www.cjcr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/950-cjuc2011may24>, May 24, 2011; Leuenberg Church Fellowship, “A Contribution from the Reformation Churches of Europe to the Relationship between Christians and Jews,” <http://www.cjcr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/eur/715-lcf01june24>, June 24, 2001.

books of both Testaments’, (*Dei Verbum*, 16), who speaks both in the old and new Covenants.” The consistent reference to the “Old Testament”, and here, the “old Covenant,” is, unfortunately, language that makes a supersessionist value judgment, that the Jewish Bible is “old,” implying the existence of a “new.” For Jews, the Bible is neither “old,” nor “former,” nor even “first,” and the sacred texts (Mishnah, Talmud, and midrashim) that developed as interpretations of the Bible in the following centuries were built upon a foundation that is still relevant. In addition, for those Jews who would be interested in discussing God, the assertion that Jews and Christians encounter the same God is problematic. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often grouped together as the world’s three great monotheistic traditions, but grouping them in this way can obscure significant differences in the beliefs of Christians, Muslims and religious Jews. Jon Levenson eloquently addresses this point in his critique of the 2000 Jewish document *Dabru Emet*:

For their part, Jews have *not* always been convinced that Christians worship the same God. Maimonides, for example, the great Sephardic legal authority and philosopher of the 12th century, explicitly classifies Christianity as idolatry, thus forbidding contact with Christians of the sort permitted with practitioners of other, non-idolatrous religions. Even in the medieval Ashkenazic world, where a very different view of Christianity obtained, some authorities interpreted the monotheistic affirmation of the *Shema*, the mandatory daily declaration of Jewish faith, as an explicit denial of the doctrine of the Trinity. The issue is even more basic than the familiar questions of whether Jesus was the messiah and whether the Torah is still in effect or has been superseded by the Gospel: it is a question of the identity of God Himself. For traditional Christianity sees Jesus not only as a spokesman of God, in the manner of a Jewish prophet, but also and more importantly as an incarnation—the definitive and unsurpassable incarnation—of the God of Israel. In the

words of the Nicene Creed (recited liturgically in Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and many Protestant churches to this day), Jesus is “true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.” Participants in Jewish-Christian dialogue often speak as if Jews and Christians agreed about God but disagreed about Jesus. They have forgotten that in a very real sense, orthodox Christians believe Jesus is God.⁵⁰

Another stumbling block to greater understanding between Jews and Christians is the perception that the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible are the same document. In truth, the differences between the two are more than cosmetic. The canons are different in significant ways: the Catholic and Orthodox forms of the Old Testament contain books that are not sacred in Jewish tradition, and certain translation issues pertaining to the use of the Septuagint vs. the Hebrew/Masoretic manuscripts result in significant theological changes.⁵¹ In addition, the differences in canon create different narrative arcs: the Hebrew Bible ends with a review of previous events and the return from the Babylonian Exile, while the Old Testament (in Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions) ends with prophecies about a coming messiah. The latter canonical order creates a direct link to the beginning of the New Testament, thereby supporting the belief that together, the “two testaments” create a single document. It is also why many Jews are asked, “Why don’t you see it? Can’t you see how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament?”⁵²

⁵⁰ Jon D. Levenson, “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Commentary* 112:5 (December 2001): 31-37.

⁵¹ Such as in the translation of Isaiah 7:14, the referent of Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38, concerning the virgin birth that is not attested in the Hebrew.

⁵² It is noteworthy that in the 2nd c. CE, Marcion proposed a significant differentiation between Judaism and nascent Christianity; Iraneus’ counter-arguments and the identification of Marcion’s views as heretical effectively prohibited the exploration of complete differentiation, for the time being. It should be noted, however, that I am not advocating Marcionism here. Rather, I am pointing out a problem that emerges from a particular Chris-

Multiple perceived points of connection can, in fact, foster a Christian attack on Judaism. Because of the unique Christian focus on Judaism, we also see a unique degree of triumphalism and critique. In a *Commonweal* issue dedicated to an examination of Catholic supersessionism, Steven Englund takes note of “the asymmetry of Christianity’s and Judaism’s mutual dependence”⁵³ as well as the quandary that has developed over the last 2000 years as Christians have reacted to their “secret little Jewish problem.”⁵⁴ Jews are uniquely threatening to Christianity because of their perceived proximity *combined* with their difference: “the church owes too much to Judaism. And no good deed goes unpunished.”⁵⁵ If Judaism is so closely related to Christianity, then Jews’ insistence on remaining Jewish is perceived as a rejection of Christian teaching. Or, as Ralph Keen explains, Jews were cast early on not as members of a community with its own ideas, traditions, and integrity, but as foils to Christianity: “Jews were generally seen as repudiators of Christianity rather than as outsiders adhering to a positive religious choice regarding redemption.”⁵⁶ Englund summarizes the contempt that has been bred by perceived familiarity in this way: “The Jews have had to live in a world that tells them that they are wrong about one of theirs (Jesus) and that they wrongly interpret their own sacred Scriptures, even as they have had to watch an oppressive rival religion batten on those Scriptures. No other religion in the world has had to do that.”⁵⁷

tian perspective on Judaism and its scripture that has had a profound and negative impact on Christian-Jewish relations. A new approach is now needed.

⁵³ Steven Englund, “Getting Past Supersessionism: An Exchange on Catholic-Jewish Dialogue,” *Commonweal* 141:4 (February 17, 2014): 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

4. Supersessionism

In his analysis of Christian engagement with Judaism, Joslyn-Siemiatkoski describes traditional supersessionist ideology as the “elder brother of Said’s Orientalism.”⁵⁸ That is, the “otherness” of Judaism has, historically, provided a means of “identification-over” whereby the early church (and subsequent generations of Christians) could see themselves as the “new Israel,” holders of the “new covenant,” believers in a God who is more gracious and loving than the God of the “Old Testament.” Though a bald analysis of these beliefs immediately reveals important distortions, the ideas themselves are still subtly present within much of the work devoted to more positive Christian-Jewish intercommunity engagement. The evolution of supersessionism has led to a reality in which Christian comparative theologians are not interested in examining Judaism unless it is viewed as the “near Other”⁵⁹ and helps illuminate Christianity: “even comparative theology scholars fall prone to producing Jews when it fits their needs and renders them and their tradition invisible when it does not.”⁶⁰ This is evident in some of the texts cited above, in which Judaism is presented as *useful* for Christian self-examination.

The authors of the 1974 “Guidelines,” for example, ask that “[a]n effort will be made to acquire a better understanding of whatever in the Old Testament retains its own perpetual value, since that has not been cancelled by the later interpretation of the New Testament. Rather, the New Testament brings out the full meaning of the Old, while both Old and New illumine and explain each other.” Though the conviction that some value remains in the “Old Testament” is

⁵⁸ Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Comparative Theology and the Status of Judaism,” 92.

⁵⁹ Or, what Gerald Bruns calls Christianity’s “own other.” Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1992), 208.

⁶⁰ Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Comparative Theology and the Status of Judaism,” 93.

valuable and not universally present in Christian thought, one should take note of the fact that it implies that only *some* material retains value. In addition, the assertion that the New Testament “brings out the full meaning of the Old, while both the Old and New illumine and explain one another,” places on the proverbial table a theological assertion that Jews should, in fact, learn about how the New Testament fulfills and explains their own Bible.⁶¹ This is an assertion that asks for a kind of engagement from Jews that many will not find acceptable, accurate, or compelling.

The solution to this problem is, according to Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, an authentic study of Judaism that “seeks to shed supersessionist stances towards Judaism and lays the foundation for the re-reading of one’s home tradition as a result of engaging with Jewish sources.”⁶² He contends that the latter component of this endeavor is of utmost importance: the Christian student must reflect on his own tradition through the lens of Judaism. He praises Peter Phan’s work because “he sees Judaism as a resource for his own theology,”⁶³ hence avoiding triumphalism or identification of Judaism as a “limb” or “root” of Christianity. However, even this approach belies a utilization of Judaism that is part of a subtle form of supersessionism: though conscious self-reflection through a Jewish lens can afford a Christian the opportunity to grow, thereby seeing

⁶¹ Peter Phan presents an excellent examination of the problems with the notion of “fulfillment” evident in Christian (and specifically Catholic) approaches to Judaism. In response to the ubiquitous teaching that the New Testament “fulfills” the Old (rather than replace it), he notes that the idea of fulfillment is, essentially, an insensitive one, implying that there is a deficiency in Judaism which Christianity and its texts have come to correct. He suggests: “Perhaps until we Christians have walked in the shoes of the ‘fulfilled’ and undergone the same violence and hatred like the Jews at the hand of others, we should not talk about ourselves as ‘fulfillers.’” Peter C. Phan, “Judaism and Christianity: Reading Cardinal Koch’s Address Between the Lines and Against the Grain,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 7 (2012), <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/2076/1779>, 5.

⁶² Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Comparative Theology and the Status of Judaism,” 100.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 101.

Judaism as a useful and important aspect of the dialogue, it falls into an approach that does precisely that: emphasizes the “usefulness” of Judaism, mining it as a resource for Christian self-perception. The question therefore emerges: do Jewish participants in this work want to be used in such a fashion?

5. The complexity of Jewish identity

An additional and significant problem to address is the reality that many Christians engaged in theologies of religious pluralism have not yet adequately worked to understand the nature of Jewish identity. Often, Christians make assumptions about the beliefs of the Jews they are addressing, choosing to focus on theological points of connection or at least familiarity. Several aspects of the complexity of modern Judaism should be taken into consideration when Christian communities seek to engage Jews.

First, participants must take into account the role of secular/atheist Jews: A large and important percentage of Jews identify Jewishly but not for religious purposes, often without any interest in religion. According to the Pew Research Center 2013 Survey of American Jews, ancestry and culture are much more important than religion, except among Orthodox Jews; hence the emphasis on “religion” in understanding Judaism is biased towards Orthodoxy. The survey revealed that 62% of American Jews believe that being Jewish is about ancestry/culture, while only 15% stated that it is about religion. Half of all Jews—including members of the Ultra-Orthodox community—stated that being an atheist is not incompatible with being Jewish; the element that would be most incompatible with Jewish identity is belief in Christ (which is a fact that requires further examination in and of itself). What is essential to being Jewish, according to this survey, is remembering the Holocaust (73%); leading a moral and ethical life (69%); and working for social justice and equality (56%); only 19% felt

observing Jewish law is most important.⁶⁴ Even in Israel, 41.4% of Jews identify as purely secular.⁶⁵ The fact is, Jewish identity is experiencing a seismic shift, and I, for one, do not consider it to be a death knell.⁶⁶ Rather, it is time for leaders in the Jewish and Christian communities to reflect on this shift and refrain from ignoring Jewish identities that are inconvenient.

The failure to take into account the role of secularism in contemporary Jewish life is made evident, in part, by the fact that throughout texts focused on the encounter between Jews and Christians, we find the word “faith.” One of the guiding questions of the Luce seminar was, “What does my neighbor’s faith mean for mine?” In the context of Judaism, however, it is necessary to ask: what is “faith?” Isn’t it approached quite differently in various forms of Christianity from how it is in Judaism? “Faith” is, itself, a difficult category in Jewish thought. In addition to the fact that a significant percentage of Jews are atheists and/or secular, we find encouragement from some Jewish leaders to keep matters of faith private. For example, in “Confrontation,” Soloveitchik argued that interfaith engagement “should occur not at a theological but at a mundane level,” focusing on social justice issues, as matters of belief should be private, not subjected to

⁶⁴ Drew Silver, “Jewish Essentials: For Most America Jews, Ancestry and Culture Matter More than Religion,” Pew Research Center 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews, Feb.20-June 13, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/01/jewish-essentials-for-most-american-jews-ancestry-and-culture-matter-more-than-religion>, October 1, 2013; Alan Cooperman, ed., “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey>, 2013.

⁶⁵ Annette Grossbongardt, “Religion and Secularism in Israel: Unholy Conflict in the Holy Land,” *Spiegel Online International*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/religion-and-secularism-in-israel-unholy-conflict-in-the-holy-land-a-469996.html>, Mar. 7, 2007.

⁶⁶For discussion of the shift in Jewish identity, see (among others): Jack Wertheimer, “Surrendering to Intermarriage,” *Commentary* 111:3 (2001): 25-32; Rachel Levin and David Katznelson, “Jewish Identity is More Complex Than Ticking a Box,” *Haaretz*, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.552355>, Oct. 14, 2013.

the critiques of others.⁶⁷ Second, Judaism is and has always been a tradition in which deed is central, and even in some cases more important than faith. What a Jew *does* is of great concern; the central question guiding much of Jewish interpretation and sacred literature is: How does God want me to *live*? The fact that God is present in the question is often surprisingly irrelevant. In many cases, the halakhic (legal) literature of Judaism ironically demonstrates a lack of concern about what God actually thinks or wants: Jewish law and, subsequently, Jewish life, is largely the purview of human communities in conversation (and debate) with one another.⁶⁸ Especially for contemporary Jews, Jewish normative practice can be divorced

⁶⁷ Soloveitchik, 23-24.

⁶⁸ Though God's name is often mentioned in the traditional texts that form the proverbial backbone of post-biblical Judaism, many of the important ideas and conversations therein do not entail much involvement from God. There is no Talmudic tractate on "God" or on "faith." The decisions that must be made, and the interpretations that can be offered, usually emerge solely from the human realm, as—the rabbis note—they should. In fact, one telling text reveals how small God's role is in matters of religious import. In b. Baba Metzia 59a-b, several scholars are engaged in an argument about the ritual purity of an oven. R. Eliezer has one opinion, and all of the other scholars disagree with him. He presents every imaginable support for his argument, and they refuse to be convinced. Sure that he is right, R. Eliezer uses miraculous events to support his view: "If the halakhah agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it!", and "If the halakhah agrees with me, let this stream of water prove it!" Though the carob tree stands up and walks to a new location, and though the stream of water flows backwards, the other scholars are still not convinced. After more miracles are used to support R. Eliezer's view, a divine voice from heaven booms out, "Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakhah agrees with him??" R. Joshua, the leader of the dissenting scholars, stands up and exclaims: "It is not in heaven! (Deuteronomy 30:12) What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: Since the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai: 'after the majority must one incline.'" (Exodus 23:2) In other words, God has been informed that his opinion no longer matters; decision-making is in the hands of the community. Lest the reader feel this is an act of blasphemy, the text continues: "R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed [with joy], and replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'"

from theology. Many Jews who adhere to aspects of Jewish practice are agnostic or atheist. The value in Sabbath observance, keeping kosher, observing holidays, and studying sacred texts can and often does lie in the realms of tradition, culture, and history for contemporary Jews. Hence, “faith” is not a universally helpful category for discussing Judaism.⁶⁹

Even among Jews for whom religion is of great importance, it is difficult to determine which elements of religiosity are shared. While many documents produced by communities invested in Christian-Jewish engagement emphasize Jewish commitment to halakhah, God concepts, and messianic hopes, religious Jews are themselves quite diverse and even actively divided on these issues.

Second, the relationship between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews is difficult and complex. The disagreement and even vitriol between these groups is a huge factor in any attempt to understand contemporary Judaism. Hermeneutical practices, worldviews, theological emphases, and social values differ profoundly among various Jewish groups, and especially between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Though there is diversity within Orthodoxies as well, it often becomes evident that many Orthodox Jews see non-Orthodox Jews as heretics or “not really Jewish,” even questioning whether or not non-Orthodox Jews can count in a minyan.⁷⁰ In turn, non-Orthodox Jews resent this characterization and view Orthodoxy as a dogmatic and stagnant form of Judaism. In Israel, the problem is exacerbated by the slow growth of progressive Judaism, the control Orthodox groups have over central elements of public affairs, and the rapidly growing “haredi” (ultra-Orthodox) population. This conflict has been chronicled in

⁶⁹ The emphasis on “faith” in Christian TRP is notable, for example, in the work of Frank Clooney, who defines CT as “faith seeking understanding.” Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

⁷⁰ Moses ben Maimon, *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuvah: The Laws of Repentance*, Eliyahu Touger, trans. (Jerusalem and New York: Moznaim, 1990), 3:8.

numerous books and articles, all worth perusing by any person interested in studying contemporary Judaism.⁷¹

Third, Non-Orthodox (Progressive) Jews have radically different views on central issues such as the existence of God; the nature of God; whether or not revelation occurred in Jewish history, and how; the authorship and history of the Hebrew Bible; and the role of halakhah. Though progressive Jews tend to have greater mutual respect and cooperation than exists between progressive and orthodox Jews, the differences are still profound and important. Much of contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue is biased towards Orthodox theology, depending on categories that would not easily be applicable for progressive or non-religious Jews. In some cases, interfaith dialogue with Jews might be easier than intrafaith dialogue among Jews.

Fourth, not to be understated here is the fact that one of the central features of Jewish hermeneutics in all text study is argument. Debate and dialogue are often more important in the study of sacred text than normative dogma. Raphael Jospe states in this way:

One might think that an argument for the sake of heaven should lead to a peaceful resolution, yet that is not the rabbis' intention. An argument not for the sake

⁷¹ As just a few examples of works surrounding this issue, see: [Samuel G. Freedman](#), *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); [Annie Hirsch](#) and [Yosef Reinman](#), *One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues That Divide Them* (New York: Schocken, 2003); [Jack Wertheimer](#), *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Daniel J. Elazar, "Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism: How to Square the Circle," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, [Daniel Elazar On-Line Library: Jerusalem Letters of Lasting Interest](#) 371, <http://jcpa.org/dje/articles2/orth-nonorth.htm>, December 1997; David Ellenson, "Obscene Orthodox Hatred Demands a Clear Denunciation," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, <http://forward.com/articles/10640/obscene-orthodox-hatred-demands-a-clear-denunciati/>, May 4, 2007 (which garnered multiple public responses).

of heaven, as when a person sues another person for a debt, has to be resolved by the court; closure must be attained, and justice must be served. But when the argument is for the sake of heaven, there is no winner and there is no loser. The truth can never be closed; it must always continue to be sought through the open exchange of diverse ideas.⁷²

Agreement on central issues often raised in interfaith work is therefore not a desideratum within Jewish communities. How, then, can Jews attempt to “represent” a community approach to these conversations?

Finally, we confront the polemics surrounding the question, “Who is a Jew?” How can Christian communities who seek to engage Jews be adequately prepared without engaging this question? What, after all, makes a person Jewish? Halakhically, it is either birth or conversion. If we accept the halakhic view, then being Jewish can involve belief, study, practice, ethnicity, genealogy, or a host of other factors, as long as the person was born Jewish or converted. Questions consistently emerge, however, about the halakhic definition: which parent passes on Jewish identity? What kind of conversion is necessary to enter the Jewish community? Different movements in Judaism have differing answers to these questions, and at times do not respect one another’s claims. Hence even a halakhic definition does not satisfy the question. Michael Satlow begins *Creating Judaism* with the question, “What is Judaism?”⁷³ He notes that “Judaism’s diversity is easier to explain than its unity,”⁷⁴ and decides that his focus for the study will include any community that self-identifies as Jewish.⁷⁵ By

⁷² Raphael Jospe, “Pluralism out of the Sources of Judaism: The Quest for Religious Pluralism without Relativism,” *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, Goshen Gottstein, ed. (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 121.

⁷³ Michael L. Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1.

⁷⁴ Satlow, 7.

⁷⁵ Satlow, 8.

therefore admitting groups such as messianic Jews, the majority of Jewish people reading this book would likely disagree with Satlow's generous umbrella. Because of the great number of secular and/or atheist Jews, along with debate about multiple aspects of Jewish identity, it is difficult to formulate a definition of "Judaism" or "Jewish" that does not ignore a significant percentage of the actual Jewish population.

The most accurate and comprehensive definition of Judaism that I have yet encountered appears in a 1958 interview between Mike Wallace and Abba Eban on the 10th anniversary of the birth of the state of Israel. At one point in the interview, Wallace is confused by some of Eban's statements about the role of Israel in contemporary Jewish identity, and states: "But Judaism is a religion, sir." Eban replies:

It is a religion, and it is a peoplehood, and it is a civilization, and it is a faith, and it is a memory; it is a world of thought and of spirit and of action and it cannot be restrictively defined.⁷⁶

Given the breadth (and yet, accuracy) of this definition, who has the right to represent Jewish people in the work of religiously pluralistic dialogue? Only religious Jews? Only rabbis? Non-religious Jews have a vested interest in healthy intercommunity relations between Jews and Christians, to combat persecution and misunderstanding. Many non-religious Jews are very proud of their Jewishness and gladly identify with Jewish culture, hermeneutical traditions, and practices. In addition, it is clear that secularism and assimilation provide no shelter from antisemitism and hence we cannot afford to ignore secular and atheist Jews in this work. The events of the Dreyfus Affair (in which the man attacked by the government as well as the public was a fully assimilated Jew), along with the Shoah (in which racial definitions of

⁷⁶ The entire text of this interview can be found at: http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/eban_abba_t.html.

“Jewish” were normative), demonstrate that Jewishness is somehow intractable in the eyes of much of the world community, regardless of belief or practice.⁷⁷ Therefore, not only religious Jews have a role to play in this work.

Questions to Pursue Going Forward

This paper is not intended to put an end to Christian-Jewish engagement, nor to silence the work of those involved in Christian theologies of religious pluralism. Rather, the critique offered here is intended to refine this work, deconstruct that which merits deconstruction, and push participants in the conversation to greater honesty. There is no doubt that Christian approaches to Judaism and Jews have progressed in recent decades. I am grateful that the dominant Christian approaches are no longer expressed in violence, be it spiritual or physical. The problems that remain, however, are important. I leave the reader with questions and thoughts that I hope will be addressed in future scholarship, as we work together to create a better space for engagement.

- Is it possible to construct means through which Christian thinkers engaged in theologies of religious pluralism can grant Judaism’s (plural) authenticity? When Jews and Christians sit down at the proverbial table for intercommunity engagement, what are the needs of the participants? What can they live with? What affords the people at the table dignity in their identities as Jews?

⁷⁷ The early Jewish Reform movement is a good example of this dynamic. The first Reformers in Europe and the US sought to revise Jewish practice to eliminate those aspects of Judaism that were most off-putting: praying in Hebrew, odd holidays, kosher dietary laws, etc. By removing these ritual elements and focusing solely on the moral elements of Judaism, the reformers believed they had eradicated the cause of antisemitism. They were obviously wrong. Antisemitism escalated in the nineteenth century, informed not only by two-thousand years of Christian hatred of Jews, but also by modern racial theory. Hence, a Jew could not escape being a Jew, regardless of his or her level of identification and practice. (Incidentally, the Reform movement has since changed trajectory and now re-emphasizes Jewish tradition and law.)

- Perhaps the attempt to build an approach to Jewish-Christian engagement which honors the unique nature of Jewish identity will ultimately reveal that Jews and Christians cannot address religious pluralism in conversation with each other on a general level. Only *specific groups* within those communities can do so: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular Jews might have to approach this work individually. How, then, can this work take place?
- Motivations must also be analyzed in Christian-Jewish engagement. Why do the participants come to the table? According to central works in theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology, many Christians participate to learn, to engage in critical self-reflection, and to gain new insight. Why do Jews participate? Certainly some Jewish participants in this work want to share ideas about God, about humanity, and about how we should live. However, it is necessary for everyone engaged in the project of Christian-Jewish engagement to be honest about the fact that the motivations that Jews have for this work often, at the core, comprise some version of self-preservation: we do this “so they won’t kill us;” we do this “to stockpile sandbags against the next pogrom.”⁷⁸ Jolene and Menahem Kellner offer a critique of such Jewish motivations to engage in this work: “implicit in [this] argument, or so it appears, is the assumption or hope that if we Jews are ‘nicer’ theologically to other religions, their adherents will be nicer to us. We doubt it.”⁷⁹
- Finally, I propose that it is time for Christians to stop engaging Jews as if we were family, as if we were so intertwined. It is time for Christians interested in this work to engage Jews as “the other”—not as a dangerous other, not as a scary other, but

⁷⁸ Both of these statements were uttered by Jewish colleagues of mine while we discussed Jewish-Christian engagement. I thank Devorah Schoenfeld (personal correspondence, May 2012) and Erica Martin (personal correspondence, June 2012).

⁷⁹ Jolene Kellner and Menahem Kellner, “Respectful Disagreement: A Response to Raphael Jospe,” in Gottstein, ed., *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, 132.

as “the other” described by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas when they explore the meaning of “hospitality.”⁸⁰ Meir Sendor takes these two thinkers and their views and applies them to Jewish-Christian engagement. He correctly notes that much interfaith work, along with much recent Christian scholarship in this field, emphasizes points of commonality or shared history, which is problematic in light of true hospitality: “Hospitality is not achieved if it is extended only to the familiar, to the family, or even one welcomed as though they were family... Real hospitality is a welcome that respects the other as himself, not because he can be rendered like oneself.”⁸¹ When participants emphasize perceived intimacy, connection, or similarity, they do violence to the act of engaging the other:

Instead of an honest relationship with the religious other, instead of real hospitality, the result is a Procrustean bed or the beds of Sodom. In the Greek myth as well as the rabbinic aggadah [b. San 109b], the host offers his guest a bed, and then fits him to the measure of the bed: if the guest is too tall, he cuts off his legs; if the guest is too short, he stretches him on the bed used as a rack. This is the essential transgression against true hospitality: a neutralizing, relativizing welcome, forcing the guest to fit the dimensions of the bed of the host.⁸²

I contend that the only way to eradicate patterns of super-sessionism, triumphalism, and one-sided utilization of Jews and Judaism by Christians is, for the time being, to afford to Judaism and the Jews the status of “wholly Other,” and not a people or tradition that forms a part of the greater Christian

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” trans. Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5:3, 2000; Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

⁸¹ Meir Sendor, “The Violence of the Neutral in Interfaith Relations,” in Gottstein, ed., *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, 161-162.

⁸² Sendor, 154-155.

body. I am not denying that connections exist; rather, I am arguing that such connections should not at this point be used as a point of departure.

John Cobb makes the argument that Christians should be silent, for the time being, when encountering Jews and Judaism, without the expectation that Jews must also learn from Christians. This silence is necessary, not only for the purpose of learning to see Judaism more clearly, but as a result of Christianity's deeply ingrained anti-Judaism: "...it is not clear that Christians can offer much to Jews except apologies until Christianity has been freed of its anti-Judaism. ...Christians are not in a position to speak to Jews until our own transformation has advanced a long way. The Christian purpose in the dialogue with Jews must be to change Christianity."⁸³

Though self-critique among Christians is certainly an important component of the ongoing work of interreligious dialogue, I do not know if many Christians would accept the silence advocated by Cobb, nor do I believe it would ultimately be useful. However, it is possible to identify and uproot the belief that Judaism is an arm, a source, or a brother of Christianity. Only after Christians engaged in this work allow Jews to represent themselves fully, out of their own volition, in their own words, as members of a community that has an (admittedly complex) integrity unrelated to Christianity, can the conversation return to examining commonalities and points of connection, in the reconciliation that results from this work.

⁸³ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue—Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 48-9. Note, however, that Cobb expects that a changed, purified, healed Christianity might serve as a better witness of Christ to the Jews, who might then be motivated to accept Jesus.