

JEWISH LITERACY
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Judaism & Christianity

1. Importance of talking about Judaism & Christianity

- a) We live in a Christian world
 - i) We all have
 - ii) Christian friends, many have Christian relatives, some have Christian spouses
 - iii) By & large, the Christians don't hate us, they often love us.
 - iv) This love is a problem Jews have not dealt with
 - v) How to relate to Christians and to Christianity is perhaps the most common religious problem that most of us face
- b) We have a brief window to lock in peace and understanding
- c) We need honest understanding
 - i) It is very tempting to compare the best in Judaism with the worst in Christianity
 - ii) It's also tempting to compare what we know about Judaism to what we misunderstand about Christianity.
- d) Final reason, interfaith dialogue a passion of mine

2. Some basics about Christianity

- a) Christianity is based on Jewish ideas
 - i) Messiah a Jewish idea
 - ii) Sacrifice of Jesus based on animal sacrifice
 - iii) Salvation is a Jewish idea
 - iv) Grace is a Jewish idea
 - v) Role of priest as intermediary is a Jewish idea
 - vi) "Our Father who art in heaven" "Thy Kingdom come" all Jewish ideas
- b) Christianity is a beautiful idea
 - i) God becoming human to endure the pain that we endure
 - ii) Most of Jesus' teachings are Jewish
 - iii) Don't let the trinity hang you up
 - a) I'm a father, son, brother, friend
 - b) Kabbalah speaks of 10 *sefirot* or emanations of God
- c) Basic Christian History
 - i) Time of Jesus one of great messianic expectation
 - ii) Jesus a traveling preacher and faith healer (called "Rabbi" in the Christian Bible)
 - iii) Executed by the Romans about 33 CE during Passover season
 - iv) Early Christians are Jews
 - v) Paul's invention: you don't have to be Jewish to be Christian
 - vi) Christian Bible written some 100-200 years after Jesus
 - vii) Key event is Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the 4th century

- d) Basic Christian Theology (as I understand it- lots of variations, however)
 - i) We're born in original sin from Eden
 - ii) Torah/mitzvot no help because we can't fulfill all
 - a) In fact, the law sent to prove that we can't fulfill it
 - iii) Need a sacrifice (what else) for the world's sins = Jesus, the Messiah
 - iv) Jesus death atones for world's sins; resurrection proves God's victory over death.
 - v) Faith and acceptance of Jesus is the key to the next world & salvation
 - a) If we could get salvation by good works, why did Jesus have to die?
 - b) Can only get to the Father through Jesus
 - c) This is why Christians are determined to make everyone in the world Christian
 - d) But Jews already with the father or Jesus saves us without acknowledging.
 - vi) Good works are a sign of salvation not a ticket thereto
 - vii) Messiah has come but all prophecies not fulfilled?
 - a) 2nd coming
 - b) salvation is about your soul, not of this world
- e) Christianity changed dramatically in its early years
 - i) Began as a Jesus is Messiah movement
 - ii) Developed into a Jesus is God born of a virgin who dies for us movement.

3. So, what is the Jewish response to Christian teachings?

- a) Why we don't accept Jesus as Messiah or prophet
 - i) Jewish Prophecies: World peace, 1 religion, gathering of exiles, end of famine, disease
 - ii) Christian understanding of Messiah as a concept different from Jewish
 - a) Jews understand Messiah as fully human and only human
 - b) Christians understand Jesus/Messiah as fully God and fully human.
 - c) no discussion of atonement
 - d) many false messiahs in Jewish history (Bar Kochba in 132, Shabtai Zvi in 1665)
 - iii) Why Jews don't accept Jesus as a prophet
 - a) He speaks in his own name
 - b) He adds to the tradition
 - c) By the time of the rabbis, he was the center of a competing religion
- b) Jewish focus on this world vs. Christianity on next
- c) Jewish focus on actions (mitzvot) vs. Christianity on faith
 - i) God as quoted in the Talmud: "better they abandon Me but obey my laws"
- d) Sin and forgiveness (see Simon Weisenthal, "The Sunflower")
- e) Spirituality & materialism
 - i) Christians adopt Greek idea of separation >> monks, nuns, separating themselves
 - ii) Judaism sees body and soul as friends, even lovers
 - iii) Talmud: you'll be asked why you didn't enjoy all the legitimate pleasures of the world

- f) Sexuality: Paul expected Jesus' return any day. Judaism embraces sex for its values of intimacy, bonding, pleasure as well as reproduction.
- g) Discussion of the New Testament
 - i) The name is mildly insulting, means new covenant (Note: we should use term *Tanach* or Hebrew Bible, not Old Testament)
 - ii) Christian response to the times
 - a) Note that Mishna and Talmud is the Jewish response to the times.
 - b) Judaism is the religion of the Talmud!!
 - iii) Written during time of maximum competition between Jews and Christians
 - a) this is why anti-Semitism creeps in (Matthew 27:25: let Jesus' death be on us and our children; John 8:44: Jews are children of the Devil; 1st Thessalonians 2:15: Jews killed Jesus and the prophets)
 - b) many liberal Christian movements who look at their scripture much as we look at ours now recognize this.

4. So, what are we Jews to make of Christianity?

- a) Christians didn't invent anti-Semitism (it existed in Greece and Rome)
 - i) weren't unique in its practice (Muslim, Nazi, enlightenment)
 - ii) but it is clear that Christian anti-Semitism paved the way for Nazis and the holocaust
- b) Most Christians hold that the only way to heaven is through Jesus, but so what?
 - i) Only a problem if they try to convert us
 - ii) I have no problem with a Christian trying to save my soul so long as:
 - a) force or coercion not involved
 - b) misrepresentation not involved
 - (1) meaning Jews for Jesus
 - (a) can't be Jewish and Christian
 - (b) more to it than a Jew accepting Jesus as messiah
 - (c) Rabbinic Judaism is Judaism
 - c) discussion is not represented as dialogue
 - (1) in a dialogue, both sides are discussed -- most Christians knocking at your door are not interested in dialogue -- believe me I've tried.
- iii) The key is for Jews to be secure in their Judaism
- iv) Let's face it, it's unlikely that Judaism will overwhelm Christianity
 - a) bad old days: convert, leave or die
 - b) good new days: why not relax, assimilate
 - c) both lead to a world where it's not so easy to pass Judaism along
 - d) God seems to want to keep us small (8 million 2000 years ago, 14-18 million today)

5. This said, I admire and love Christianity

- a) Jews have no desire to convert non-Jews. Judaism is the one true religion for Jews
- b) I prefer that non-Jews be Christian or Muslim than secular
 - i) I want them behave as though the God of Abraham and the God of the 10 commandments is watching them and will judge them
 - ii) Walking down a dark alley example
 - iii) Christian/Muslim ethics virtually identical to Jewish ethics
- c) If the Jewish mission to the world is to bring the message of God, then the Christians and Muslims are doing our work.
- d) I love Christmas -- but love it as an outsider.
 - i) As a kid, I would always decorate Xmas trees
 - ii) I cry at *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life*
 - iii) I love Christmas music - written Chanukah carols such as "No Oil"

6. So how do we live in this brave new world for Jews

- a) Jews must remain Jewish
 - i) This is not about Chanukah vs. Christmas.
 - ii) We've kept the Torah alive for 100 generations; we must pass it to one more.
- b) Jews must know enough to answer questions of children and friends
- c) Jews must treat non-Jews with respect and demand to be treated with respect
- d) We should strive for religion in our lives but not in our government and its institutions
- e) We must recognize that most (not all - the Southern Baptists) Christian churches are renouncing Antisemitic teachings and the goal of converting Jews
- f) We must let go of our justified anger at Christians for their historical role in Antisemitism.
- g) We must recognize that the greatest threat to Jews do not come from the Christian world today.
- h) We must see Christianity as a partner in redemption of the world and we must work on our relationship.
- i) We Jews paid an unbearably horrible price, experienced unimaginable suffering in the holocaust
 - i) the result is a world shocked into re-examining its anti-Semitic views
 - ii) the result is Christian churches renouncing centuries old teachings
 - iii) the result is a window of opportunity for discussion, friendship, and, I believe, even partnership
 - iv) If we miss this window, 50 or a 100 years from now, the holocaust will seem like the WW1 - distant and abstract
 - v) And the Holocaust deniers will have their way and we will be condemned to repeat the horror