

Jewish Literacy # 13 Judaism & Christianity

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Importance of talking about Judaism & Christianity

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

Some Basics About Christianity

- Christianity is based on Jewish ideas
 - Messiah a Jewish idea
 - Sacrifice of Jesus based on animal sacrifice
 - Salvation is a Jewish idea
 - Grace is a Jewish idea
 - Role of priest as intermediary is a Jewish idea
 - "Our Father who art in heaven" "Thy Kingdom come" all Jewish ideas
- Christianity is a beautiful idea
 - God becoming human to endure the pain that we endure
 - Most of Jesus' teachings are Jewish
 - Don't let the trinity hang you up
 - I'm a father, son, brother, friend
 - Kabbalah speaks of 10 *sefirot* or emanations of God

Some Basics About Christianity

- Basic Christian History
 - Time of Jesus one of great messianic expectation
 - Jesus a traveling preacher and faith healer (called "Rabbi" in the Christian Bible)
 - Executed by the Romans about 33 CE during Passover season
 - Early Christians are Jews
 - Paul's invention: you don't have to be Jewish to be Christian
 - Christian Bible written some 100-200 years after Jesus
 - Key event is Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the 4th century

Some Basics About Christianity

- **Basic Christian Theology** (as I understand it- lots of variations, however)
 - We're born in **original sin** from Eden
 - Torah/mitzvot no help because we can't fulfill all
 - In fact, the law sent to prove that we can't fulfill it
 - Need a sacrifice (what else?) for the world's sins = Jesus, the Messiah
 - Jesus death atones for world's sins; resurrection proves God's victory over death.
 - Faith and acceptance of Jesus is the key to the next world & salvation
 - If we could get salvation by good works, why did Jesus have to die?
 - Can only get to the Father through Jesus
 - This is why Christians are determined to make everyone in the world Christian
 - Recent Catholic Insight: But Jews already with the father or Jesus saves us without us acknowledging him.

Some Basics About Christianity

- **Faith in Jesus (continued)**
 - Good works are a sign of salvation not a ticket thereto
 - Messiah has come but all prophecies not fulfilled?
 - 2nd coming
 - salvation is about your soul, not of this world
- **Christianity changed dramatically in its early years**
 - Began as a Jewish Jesus is Messiah movement
 - Developed into a Jesus is God born of a virgin who dies for us movement.

So, What is the Jewish Response to Christian Teachings?

- Why we don't accept Jesus as Messiah or prophet
 - Jewish Prophecies: World peace, 1 religion, gathering of exiles, end of famine, disease
 - Christian understanding of Messiah as a concept different from Jewish
 - Jews understand Messiah as fully human and only human
 - Christians understand Jesus/Messiah as fully God and fully human.
 - no discussion of atonement
 - many false messiahs in Jewish history (*Bar Kochba* in 132, *Shabtai Zvi* in 1665)
 - Why Jews don't accept Jesus as a prophet
 - He speaks in his own name
 - He adds to the tradition
 - By the time of the rabbis, he was the center of a competing religion
- Jewish focus on this world vs. Christianity on next
- Jewish focus on actions (*mitzvot*) vs. Christianity on faith
 - God as quoted in the Talmud: "better they abandon Me but obey my laws"

So, What is the Jewish Response to Christian Teachings?

- Sin and forgiveness (see Simon Weisenthal, "The Sunflower")
- Spirituality & materialism
 - Christians adopt Greek idea of separation >> monks, nuns, separating themselves
 - Judaism sees body and soul as friends, even lovers
 - Talmud: you'll be asked why you didn't enjoy all the legitimate pleasures of the world
- Sexuality: Paul expected Jesus' return any day. Judaism embraces sex for its values of intimacy, bonding, pleasure as well as reproduction.

The New Testament

- The name is mildly insulting, means “New Covenant” (Note: we should use term *Tanach* or Hebrew Bible, not Old Testament)
- Christian response to the times
 - Note that Mishna and Talmud is the Jewish response to the times.
 - Judaism is the religion of the Talmud!!
- Written during time of maximum competition between Jews and Christians
 - 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”)
 - many liberal Christian movements who look at their scripture much as we look at ours now recognize this.

So, what are we Jews to make of Christianity?

- Christians didn’t invent anti-Semitism (it existed in Greece and Rome)
 - weren’t unique in its practice (Muslim, Nazi, enlightenment)
 - but it is clear that Christian anti-Semitism paved the way for Nazis and the holocaust
- Most Christians hold that the only way to heaven is through Jesus, but so what?
 - Only a problem if they try to convert us
 - I have no problem with a Christian trying to save my soul so long as:
 - force or coercion not involved
 - misrepresentation not involved
 - meaning Jews for Jesus
 - can’t be Jewish and Christian
 - more to it than a Jew accepting Jesus as messiah
 - Rabbinic Judaism is Judaism
 - discussion is not represented as dialogue
 - in a dialogue, both sides are discussed -- most Christians knocking at your door are not interested in dialogue -- believe me I’ve tried.

So, what are we Jews to make of Christianity?

- The key is for Jews to be secure in their Judaism
- Let’s face it, it’s unlikely that Judaism will overwhelm Christianity
 - bad old days: convert, leave or die
 - good new days: why not relax, assimilate
 - both lead to a world where it’s not so easy to pass Judaism along
 - God seems to want to keep us small (8 million 2000 years ago, 14-18 million today)

I Admire and Love Christianity

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

How Do We Live in This Brave New World for Jews?

- Jews must remain Jewish
 - This is not about Chanukah vs. Christmas.
 - We've kept the Torah alive for 100 generations; we must pass it to one more.
- Jews must know enough to answer questions of children and friends
- Jews must treat non-Jews with respect and demand to be treated with respect
- We should strive for religion in our lives but not in our government and its institutions
- We must recognize that most (not all - the Southern Baptists) Christian churches are renouncing Antisemitic teachings and the goal of converting Jews
- We must let go of our justified anger at Christians for their historical role in Antisemitism.

How Do We Live in This Brave New World for Jews?

- We must recognize that the greatest threat to Jews do not come from the Christian world today.
- We must see Christianity as a partner in redemption of the world and we must work on our relationship.
- We Jews paid an unbearably horrible price, experienced unimaginable suffering in the holocaust
 - the result is a world shocked into re-examining its anti-Semitic views
 - the result is Christian churches renouncing centuries old teachings
 - the result is a window of opportunity for discussion, friendship, and, I believe, even partnership
 - If we miss this window, 50 or a 100 years from now, the holocaust will seem like the WW1 - distant and abstract
 - And the Holocaust deniers will have their way and we will be condemned to repeat the horror

Two Important Documents & an Important Book

- Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity
 - Appendix 1 of my book
 - [http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet -
A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity.2395.
0.html](http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_-_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html)
- A Sacred Obligation; Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People: A Statement by the Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations
 - Appendix 2 of my book
 - <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/ecumenical-christian/568-csg-02sep1>
- *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Frymer-Kensky et al, Westview Press, 2000. Wonderful discussion of key issues from both perspectives.