

“The great strength of this rich, interesting book is that it offers the perspective of both an ‘outsider’ and an ‘insider’ for Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In the interplay between the two viewpoints, these world religions are illuminated in a fresh way for a Western Christian audience. The review questions, glossaries, and annotated bibliographies that conclude each section offer the reader the opportunity to solidify what has been learned and explore more deeply. Even in a library already stocked with world religions textbooks, this one stands out as a worthy addition.”

—Kristin Johnston Lergen  
Associate Professor of Systematic Theology  
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg

“*World Religions in Dialogue* is that unique textbook that combines competent introduction, accessibility, and a thoughtful dialogue of insiders and outsiders in conversation. It will be a much-appreciated text for the introductory course on world religions, showing both the *what* of religions and the *how* of learning religions in an ongoing conversation.”

—Francis X. Clooney, SJ  
Parkman Professor of Divinity  
Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions  
Harvard University

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# world religions in dialogue

A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Pim Valkenberg, editor

  
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# INTRODUCTION

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## Exploring World Religions through Dialogue

*Pim Valkenberg*

### What Makes This Book Different?

Information about world religions is easy to get. While most students will search the Internet, teachers of world religions will often explore recently published texts. Regardless of approach, a wealth of information is available. So what makes this book worthwhile? More importantly, what makes this book different from other sources of information about world religions?

Like other sources, this book includes trustworthy information by well-informed scholars about the four non-Christian world religions most relevant to the Western culture of North America and Europe—namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. Unlike many other sources, however, this book does not approach these religions from a “neutral” or an “objective” viewpoint. Instead, it presents them from the perspective of scholars immersed in religious traditions and engaged in interreligious dialogue.

This book differs from many others mainly in that it presents dialogues between Christian scholars of other religions, and Hindu, Buddhist,

Muslim, and Jewish scholars of their own religions.<sup>1</sup> It builds on the basic idea that the interplay between these two viewpoints—the “outsider” perspective and the “insider” perspective—offers the best way to introduce religions. The book’s four parts consider Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Christianity is not included here as one of the religions discussed, but as a perspective on other religions. Each part, therefore, begins with a Christian scholar, who brings an outsider’s perspective, giving an overview of the religion in question. This perspective often serves as the starting point for those who study other religions with a “Western,” more or less Christian, mind-set, and this book hopes to build on their existing notions of these other religions. Next, the scholar who is an adherent of the religion in question will challenge this mind-set by providing an insider’s perspective. Both work together to provide commentaries on basic texts and to reflect on the dialogue between the “insider” and the “outsider” perspectives.

This distinction between “outsider” and “insider” simplifies a more complex reality in which the “insider” is an “outsider” as well, and

---

1. Many of the contributors to this text have a connection to a Catholic university, reflecting the fact that most scholars working in the field of comparative theology (including some Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists, as well as Catholics) do so in the institutional context of Catholic higher education.

the “outsider” is an “insider.” In giving a scholarly description, “insiders” necessarily adopt an outsider’s view and distance themselves from what they describe. Conversely, “outsiders” are often well acquainted with the religions they describe and as theologians they have “insider” knowledge of their own religion as well. Yet the terms *outsider* and *insider*—or their respective equivalents in anthropology, *etic* and *emic*—nonetheless offer a shorthand characterization of the two viewpoints brought into dialogue in this volume.<sup>2</sup> Even though most scholars would like to have their *etic* description of a world religion recognized by that religion’s adherents, they would not go so far as to say that the *only* valid description of a given religion is one recognized by the adherents of that religion. Outsiders employ a specific language to describe a religion, using categories that necessarily differ from those insiders would use. Yet, those who prefer to use dialogue as an instrument of mutual understanding will always try to ensure their discourse proves acceptable to the adherents of that religion.

In the history of the study of religions, the viewpoints of insiders and outsiders have been important, but limited. Many religious insiders wrote about those different from themselves merely to defend their own religion. Therefore, they usually gave a “confessional” or “theological” viewpoint of other religions, which these “pagan” or “heretic” others generally rejected because such a viewpoint only respected criteria germane to the religion defended, not to the religion described. The image held by religious adherents about their own religion has often determined the image they had of the other. Consequently, Muslims used to speak about Jews and Christians as the “people of the Scripture” (*ahl al-kitab*) because they saw themselves as

people to whom God had given the final Scripture. Conversely, Christians talked about Muslims as “Muhammadans,” thinking that the role of Muhammad in Islam would be similar to that of Christ in their own religion.

In the modern era, scholars have come to favor a more neutral, “objective” approach, free from such “confessional” biases. Using historical and literary methods, they describe religious phenomena without adding value judgments. Most modern books about world religions adopt this approach, often labeled as “the science of religions” (*Religionswissenschaft* in German) or “religious studies.” Even though many scholars of religion think that a descriptive approach shows less bias and yields more “objective” knowledge, the results of such scientific descriptions have often not been acknowledged or accepted by adherents of the religions described.

While “theological” and “science of religions” approaches have been historically valuable, they describe a religion differently than an insider-scholar of a religion would. The last third of the twentieth century saw a marked rise in relationships between religions as well as an increased awareness of religious plurality. Many religions that have their origins in non-Western cultures are now represented in the Western academic world by scholars who were raised in—or later converted to—the non-Christian religions discussed in this book. Thus, they can describe their own religions in ways that open fruitful dialogue with scholars who do not share their “insider” perspective but who may be able to translate these perspectives into worldviews more familiar to students in the West. This fertile dialogue between “insider” and “outsider” perspectives informs and shapes the structure of this book.

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2. For a sophisticated overview of different positions, see the volume edited by Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider / Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999).

## The Term *World Religions*

Most every textbook about religions uses the term *world religions*, but the phrase has a complicated history. In the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, scholars of religion began to use this term to differentiate their work from the confessional approach of Christian theology, which tended to divide religions between the “true religion” (Christianity and, to a certain extent, Judaism) and “false religions” (those of “pagans,” “heathen,” and other “unbelievers”). In this process of differentiation, the term *world religions* was coined.<sup>3</sup> Yet, most scholars who used the term to allow for a larger, more nuanced array of religions within nineteenth-century scholarship did so from a decidedly confessional perspective: they agreed that Christianity was the highest religion and the fulfillment of all people’s religious quests.<sup>4</sup> Even many of the scholars who insisted their approach was based on scientific and “objective” research, such as religious sciences pioneers Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and Christian P. Tiele (1830–1902) could not avoid using concepts and classifications derived from Christian theology.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of the twentieth century, the “scientific” approach associated with the term *world religions* gained increasing credibility, while the idea of a confessional grading, typical of a Christian theological approach to other religions, gradually disappeared. The term *world*

*religions* became one of the hallmarks of an “objective” comparative study of religion that coincided with a new awareness of religious plurality. Yet, there is strong evidence that the term is an invention of nineteenth-century scholarship that often serves unrecognized theological objectives by paying lip service to the idea that all religions are equal paths to the same ultimate end while nonetheless maintaining that Christianity is still the best or even the absolute way to get there. Therefore the contrast between a scientific and a theological approach to religion cannot be maintained as an absolute standard.<sup>6</sup>

## Different Approaches to the Study of World Religions

In one of the most influential contemporary readers on world religions, Ian Markham distinguishes four competing methodologies in the study of world religions. Two of these go back to the development of the scientific approaches outlined above. The first method—the historical-comparative method—is mainly interested in a comparison of religions based on historical research of their most important texts in their contexts; while the second method—the phenomenological method—focuses on a comparative description and interpretation of religious phenomena, such as images of God, prayer, and holy scriptures. Both methods of study

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3. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). In this book, she shows that the term *world religions* was, in fact, invented to underscore the relationship between Christianity and other religions of Indo-Aryan origin (Buddhism foremost) while suppressing the relationship with the other Semitic religions (Judaism and notably Islam).

4. See Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 75–79, which mentions Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72) and James Freeman Clarke (1810–88) as two early writers on world religions from the perspective of what they called comparative theology. On the relationship between this form of comparative theology and contemporary forms of comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 30–37.

5. See Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 107–20; Jonathan Z. Smith, “Classification,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 35–44.

6. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 324–28, with reference to the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923).

strive to be as objective as possible. The third method, which Markham calls the “confessional approach,” assumes the truth of one particular faith tradition and underscores its differences with other faith traditions. Markham advocates a fourth approach, which he calls an “empathetic approach.”

Markham uses John Dunne’s famous metaphor of “passing over” to the point of view of religious “others” and of “coming back” to one’s own point of view to characterize this methodology. This implies, first, approaching the religious tradition from the “outsider” perspective; second, it entails presenting the perspective of “a fairly orthodox adherent” of the religion in order to show this tradition in the “best possible light.”<sup>7</sup> After this “passing over,” there is a “coming back” to the original position in order to make a decision. Markham explains: “This will involve either an act of clarification or an act of modification. If one is not persuaded, then one will be in a position to clarify the reasons why one prefers the initial position; if one is persuaded to some degree, then one will find the initial position modified.”<sup>8</sup>

In this way, Markham makes clear that historical and phenomenological “outsider” approaches to world religions can be combined fruitfully with an “insider” approach. His own “empathetic” approach aims at either confirming one’s “outsider” perspective or modifying it after having been influenced by the “insider” perspective. The process of “passing over” to other perspectives and “coming back” again is similar to the “dialogical” process used in this book.

Similarly, other recent books on world religions that start from an explicitly theological perspective show that a Christian evaluation of

world religions also needs to incorporate historical and phenomenological investigations of these religions.<sup>9</sup> These recent approaches to world religions show that the goal of an “objective” and historically correct appraisal of world religions can be integrated into a wider theological approach—one in which the shift of perspective between the “outsider,” who observes a specific religion, and the “insider,” who observes his or her own religion, comprises a central methodological principle. The main insight behind such an approach is that truth is best found not with a “purely scientific” approach, nor with a “purely confessional” approach, but rather through the interplay of “outsider” and “insider” approaches that blend scholarship and religious engagement.

## Comparative Theology and Dialogue

The increased awareness of religious pluralism in the last third of the twentieth century has led not only to new “insider” approaches in the study of world religions but also to new forms of theology—mainly Christian theology—that take comparative approaches to other religions very seriously. While the name “comparative theology” was used in the nineteenth century for “confessional” forms of Christian theology that saw Christianity as the epitome of world religions, the new comparative theology explicitly includes the “objective” comparative study of religions.

This new form of comparative theology makes it difficult to maintain the contrast between scientific and theological approaches to the world religions. Francis Clooney, a Jesuit

7. Ian Markham with Christy Lohr, eds., *A World Religions Reader*, 3rd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 7.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. See Eugene Gorski, *Theology of Religions: A Sourcebook for Interreligious Study* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008). Also, Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali, eds., *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

scholar of Hinduism and one of the founders of present-day comparative theology, characterizes it as a form of theology that not only works “within the constraints of a commitment to a religious community . . . and a willingness to affirm the truth and values of that tradition”<sup>10</sup> but also learns from other faith traditions. Therefore, “comparative theology combines tradition-rooted theological concerns with actual study of another tradition.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it includes the comparative study of religion, so that “the comparative theologian works first as an academic scholar, even if she also and more deeply intends the kind of religious and spiritual learning that characterizes theology richly conceived.”<sup>12</sup> In this manner, as the subtitle of this book indicates, it is possible to use comparative theology as a new approach to world religions.

## Structure of This Book

This book proceeds from the assumption that insight into a specific religion can best be provided through dialogue between a scholar who gives an outsider approach to that religion and one who reacts to this description by giving an insider approach. Both scholars try to do justice to the “scientific” criteria of the comparative study of religion, while at the same time connecting their descriptions to their own religious backgrounds. In that sense, it would be simplistic to label the outsider approach a “scholarly” approach and the insider approach a “believer’s” approach. Both approaches are scholarly, and both scholars explicitly try to relate their approach to their religious backgrounds. Yet, because one religion is the explicit subject of the

comparison while the other is only addressed implicitly some asymmetry does result.

Most theological approaches to world religions begin with the insider approach. This text, on the other hand, begins with the outsider approach because this represents the mind-set of most Western students of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the idea being that such a mind-set can best be framed and corrected in an ongoing process of dialogue between the two points of view. In the part on Hinduism, for instance, the outsider begins by sketching how most people in the West view Hinduism—noting that the term *Hinduism* itself is a Western construct. This approach ties in with the preconceptions that some might bring to their study of Hinduism as a religion. The insider reply shows both the points where Hindus will recognize the description—for instance, because they are formed by models of Western scholarship themselves—and where they talk about their religion in different terms, such as referring to it as *sanatana dharma* (“eternal order” or “eternal duty”) instead of “Hinduism.” As part of this exchange, the insider may discuss some of the differences between concepts of religion shaped in his or her own tradition and concepts of religion that presuppose a Western, often Christian, point of view. In this sense, the dialogue explicitly discusses the religion called “Hinduism,” while also implicitly addressing the Christian religion. This method of comparison and dialogue aims to lead readers to a better understanding of the religions discussed in this book as well as to greater insight into their own religious backgrounds.

The principles outlined above determined the content of this book. First, they led to the

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10. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 9.

11. *Ibid.*, 10.

12. *Ibid.*, 12.

decision to concentrate on a small number of world religions rather than discussing a greater number in less depth. The method of seeking understanding through dialogue and changing perspectives requires an extended discussion of the religions concerned. Different books on world religions may cover any number of religions since it is not at all clear what exactly a “world religion” is. Historically speaking, scholars employed the term to contrast religions with a worldwide presence from those that had relevance only in a specific cultural context; so “Hinduism” would be considered a world religion, but the religion of the Yorubas in Nigeria or the Dakotas in North America would not.

In the present situation the term *world religions* usually refers to those religions considered relevant in one’s own cultural context, mixed with an awareness that they are not limited to that particular cultural context. This implies that a list of world religions drawn up in Germany might differ from such a list compiled in Romania, Mexico, or South Africa. In almost all Western cultural contexts, the list of world religions will include at least Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and it will most likely incorporate Hinduism and Buddhism as well. Although some would argue for the inclusion of at least one of the East-Asian religions, such as Confucianism and Taoism, this text limits itself to the five religions important in every Western context.

Because this book presumes a basic knowledge of Christianity, it does not deal with Christianity in a separate part, but implicitly addresses it in all parts. This does not imply that all those engaged in the study of world religions have a thorough background in Christianity, rendering any further study of their home tradition unnecessary. However, this book supposes that most already know the basics of Christianity and thus enter the study of world religions from a Christian perspective, however vaguely articulated. Therefore, the text begins with the

religion closest to Christianity, namely Judaism, and continues with Islam as the third member of the Abrahamic family (or, in a more objective terminology, West-Asian or Semitic religions). Finally, it discusses the two great South-Asian religions that originated in India: Hinduism and Buddhism.

In this text the outsider approaches can be characterized as “Christian theological approaches”; however, they differ from the confessional approaches of the nineteenth century in not taking Christianity as the “absolute” or “highest” religion, but as the point of departure for the comparison for the outsider. Just like present-day comparative theology, these approaches are aware of their own provenance and context, are conscious of other approaches, and aim to engage in dialogue with them. In that sense, this book differs not only from “neutral” or “objective” approaches to world religions but also from traditional Christian textbooks about world religions.

The explorations of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism each have the same basic structure, consisting of four chapters. In the first chapter, the outsider, who gives an *etic* approach, starts with an introduction to the religion that explicitly takes the presupposed knowledge of the readership as its point of departure. Why is it important for Christians to know about this religion? The outsider begins with a short overview of Christian approaches to that religion, of what is good or problematic about these approaches, and of avenues for future dialogue. So the exploration begins with “pictures of the other,” which may sound strange for a world religions book, but highlights how one’s religious background often determines one’s approach.

From this point of view, the outsider discusses seven aspects of the religion, beginning with a description of what makes this religion unique and different from other religions. Often, this is phrased as “What basic question does this

religion try to answer?” or “What is ‘the way’ this religion claims to offer?” The second aspect tackles the basic written sources of that religion, with the awareness that an outsider may take a biased approach to the sources and their canonical traditions. Third, the outsider chapter gives some history of that religion. While not comprehensive, this history surveys the most important developments, distinguishing, for instance, between “classical” and “modern” forms of that religion. The fourth aspect explores conceptions of the holy or the divine, and the fifth delves into corresponding conceptions of human beings. The sixth aspect discusses typical practices in the religion (rituals and holidays as well as ethics and social justice), and finally the outsider discusses the recent history of dialogue with that religion from the point of view of Christianity.

In the second chapter of each part the insider responds with an introduction that shows how the self-understanding of a religion (as represented by the *emic* approach) may differ from the outsider’s approach. The insider’s introduction more or less parallels the outsider’s (following the seven points above), but may also include some response to what the outsider has written. In the last section, the insider discusses dialogue from the perspective of the non-Christian partner and offers an opinion on Christian dialogue initiatives (what is and is not helpful).

The third chapter in each part consists of a selection of texts from the most important sources of the religion under discussion along with insider and outsider commentaries. Some of the texts represent the typical interests of an outsider (for instance, “Messianic expectations” for a Christian approach to Judaism), while others reflect an insider approach (for instance, “Israel”—people, land, state—for a Jewish approach).

The two partners—insider and outsider—write the final chapter together in different ways, reflecting the divergent styles of their dialogues.

They reflect on the process of writing together—on what they learned through the dialogical process and on the most important items to continue the dialogue. Finally, each part ends with questions for discussion, suggestions for further reading, and a glossary.

The book’s conclusion focuses on an essential element in the process of teaching Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism: learning from religious others. It discusses how the method of experiential learning—that is, learning by experiencing religious others rather than reading about them—fits well with the approach advocated in the book. This conclusion describes forms of experiential learning and presents two particular methods. The first method introduces students to religions found in their area through visits to local religious communities and subsequent reflection on these visits. The second method offers more extended experiential learning through service in these religious communities and reflection on this service-learning in papers and group presentations.

## Learning about and from Religious Others

Learning about world religions in the classical way, using textbooks and “objective” approaches to these religions, is good. However, as this book makes clear, it is better to learn not only *about* these religions but also *from* these religions and their adherents. One can do this by being attentive to the different possible approaches to world religions—both outsider and insider. Another strategy consists of becoming aware of how one’s background can affect one’s view of other religions and the terminology one uses. A dialogue between outsiders and insiders can show not only how adherents of other religions see their own tradition differently than do outsiders but also

how outsider perceptions are often shaped by Western, often Christian, influences (including the term *world religions* itself). For this reason, it makes sense to include comparative theological perspectives as well. Finally, an exploration

of other religions can be even more fruitful if it includes experiential learning. Listening to or even doing service in communities of religious others is another way to learn not only about them but also from them.

# PART 1: JUDAISM

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*Philip A. Cunningham and Jan Katzew*

*Chapter 1: An Outsider's Perspective*

*Chapter 2: An Insider's Perspective*

*Chapter 3: Texts and Commentary*

*Chapter 4: Concluding Reflections*

Resources for Further Study



# An Outsider's Perspective

*Philip A. Cunningham*

## An Overview of Christian Approaches to Judaism

The relationship between Christianity and Judaism is unique among pairings of world religions. Of course, each bilateral interrelationship has its own distinctive features and “chemistry,” but from a Christian perspective it is impossible to teach or express the Christian faith without referring to Judaism. This is true of no other religious heritage with which Christianity interacts.

## A Uniquely Intertwined Interreligious Relationship

The unparalleled interlacing of Judaism and Christianity is due to the following facts: (1) Jesus of Nazareth and the members of the earliest churches were all Jews of the late Second Temple period;<sup>1</sup> (2) the Christian biblical canon includes what came to be known as the “Old Testament,” which more or less corresponds, though in a

different order and based on different textual traditions, to the Jewish sacred scriptures: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings; and (3) fundamental Christian theological concepts are Jewish in origin and continue to be central to Jewish self-understanding (e.g., belief in the existence of one God, who created the world, a personal God who responds to prayer and enters into covenants of mutual responsibilities with people).

Thus, the church's relationship to Judaism is unique because it viscerally shapes Christian self-understanding. Pope John Paul II put it this way:

[T]he Church of Christ discovers her “bond” with Judaism by “searching into her own mystery.” . . . The Jewish religion is not “extrinsic” to us, but in a certain way is “intrinsic” to our own religion. With Judaism therefore we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.<sup>2</sup>

1. The late Second Temple period refers to the final decades in which the postexilic Temple in Jerusalem stood. For our purposes here, the period is defined as beginning with the start of Herod the Great's massive expansion of the Temple in 20 BCE and ending with the Temple's destruction by Roman legions in 70 CE during the first Jewish revolt against Roman rule. The terms BCE and CE (Before the Common Era and the Common Era) are widely used to delineate time periods without presuming Christian faith.

2. “Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome,” April 13, 1986, §4: [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/305-jp2-86apr13](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/305-jp2-86apr13). (The Christian author of this chapter is Catholic and will write about Judaism from that vantage point. Consequently, there will be citation of some pertinent Catholic documents.)

## A Conflictual Relationship

A negative and demeaning stance toward Jews and Judaism has prevailed for most of Christian history. This was not a theological inevitability, but the result of social forces.

As Christianity struggled for acceptance in the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries, it found itself negatively compared with venerable Judaism by Roman intellectuals. Christians found themselves having to defend their claims that God's promises to the people of Israel had come to fruition in the church by using Jewish scriptures as proof-texts. Since Jews could credibly assert they understood their own sacred writings better than the (mostly) former pagans who constituted Christianity, Christians had to demean Judaism in order to assert their own legitimacy. Thus from very early on, Christians universally argued they had replaced or superseded Jews as the people of God. They declared that God had cursed the Jewish people for their alleged rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. As a result, Jews were supposedly doomed to homeless wandering and shackled by a mindlessly legalistic and heartless religion.

The influence of this "supersessionism" or "theology of replacement" has been both enduring and pervasive. Biblically, for instance, Christians came to call the scriptures of ancient Israel the "Old Testament," whose single purpose was understood to prepare for and be superseded by the "New Testament." Judaism, after the coming of Christ, was thought to be obsolete.

This perspective dismissed as irrelevant the major transformation that the living tradition of Judaism underwent in the centuries after the demolition of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. Jewish scholars called rabbis refocused biblical Judaism away from the sacrificial rituals of the Temple and onto the observance of the commandments.

While few Christians today subscribe to the notion that Jews are divinely accursed, many Christians consciously or unconsciously assume they can know everything important about Judaism either by reading the Christian Old Testament or what the New Testament says about Jews. Living Judaism that has developed out of the work of the ancient rabbis escapes the horizons of Christians with such attitudes.

To really understand today's Judaism, therefore, Christians "must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."<sup>3</sup> They must dialogue with Jews in order to learn about Judaism "from the inside," as it were. But in addition to respecting the other's perspective, inevitably participants in dialogue will also try to relate what they're learning about the other to their own frameworks and categories, otherwise the new knowledge could be so foreign as to be incomprehensible. Interreligious dialogue, in other words, is a dialectical activity between different frames of reference.

Following these principles, part 1 on Judaism begins with a chapter written by a Christian who has participated in numerous dialogues with Jews. Chapter 1 introduces Judaism to readers using Christian categories but aims to accurately represent Jewish self-understanding, even if with different emphases and nuances than Jews themselves might employ. Chapter 2 is written by a member of the Jewish community who has participated in numerous dialogues with Christians. He will respond to this chapter from that perspective. In chapter 3, both authors will present selected texts to illustrate core aspects of the Jewish tradition and will offer their respective comments on them. In conclusion, the two writers will discuss their respective sections.

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3. Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration "Nostra Aetate," No. 4 (1974)*, preamble, [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/277-guidelines](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/277-guidelines).

## Distinctive Features of Judaism

### A Peoplehood

Jews understand their community as more than a “religious” one: “In dialogue with Christians, Jews have explained that they do not consider themselves as a church, a sect, or a denomination, as is the case among Christian communities, but rather as a peoplehood that is not solely racial, ethnic or religious, but in a sense a composite of all these.”<sup>4</sup> Christians conversing with Jews for the first time may be startled to learn that an individual Jew can deny the existence of God and yet be considered a full member of the Jewish community. They may be considered by more pious Jews as not very “good” Jews, but since being accounted a part of the People of Israel is determined primarily by having been born and raised within the Jewish community, idiosyncratic beliefs do not alter that fundamental Jewish identity. Likewise, rabbinic Judaism generally tends to be more concerned with orthopraxy (correct behavior) than orthodoxy (correct belief).

### God Is One

Nevertheless, during the long evolution of Jewish culture certain religious concepts have remained normative for most Jews. Probably foremost among these is the concept expressed in Judaism’s central proclamation, the Shema (named for its first word in Hebrew): “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone [or is one or unique]” (Deut. 6:4).<sup>5</sup> In the Bible these words are followed by several commands that highlight their significance:

4. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations*, 1975, [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/us-conference-of-catholic-bishops/479-nccb1975](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/us-conference-of-catholic-bishops/479-nccb1975).

5. All biblical citations are taken from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).



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A *mezuzah* is a small box containing the words of two paragraphs of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Deuteronomy 11:13–21) handwritten by a scribe. The biblical passages include the instructions to place God’s commandments (*mitzvot*) on the doorframes of Jewish homes.

Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:7–8)

Today, observant Jews recite the Shema twice each day, usually around sunrise and sunset. It is ideally a Jew’s dying utterance and is always present in formal liturgical worship. The text of the Shema and related words are placed in small containers

called *mezuzoth*, which are mounted on the door-frames of Jewish homes. They are also found in little cases affixed with straps called phylacteries, which are wound around the arms and foreheads of traditionally observant Jews as they pray.

Given the centrality of the Shema, it is a good place to begin an introduction to Judaism. The Hebrew word translated above as “Lord” is the Israelite holy name of God. It is derived from God’s statement to Moses, which emanated from a burning bush: “And God said to Moses, ‘Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.’ Thus you shall say to the Israelites Ehyeh sent me to you” (Exod. 3:14). The Hebrew words, meaning “I AM or I Will Be,” are the basis of four Hebrew letters transliterated into English as Yhwh. Out of respect for the sacredness of God’s name, Jews do not speak it. Instead, they use circumlocutions such as “the Lord” or “the Name.”

The Lord is the one God of the children of Israel, the biblical patriarch first known as Jacob and later as Israel (which means in Hebrew “to grapple or wrestle with God”; see Gen. 32:23–33). The Lord is both unique—without any rival deities or powers—and indivisible. As such, the Lord is far beyond the capacities of human beings to fully grasp. Indeed, from the Jewish perspective, humans are able to know only what God has chosen to reveal to them.

Jews understand that their ancestors received a special gift of the Lord’s revelation after being rescued by God from slavery in Egypt. The Torah, the “Teaching” given to Moses, says that the Lord entered into a covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai (see Exod. 19–24). The Lord would be their God and they would be the Lord’s people. The children of Israel understood that they should respond with gratitude for this special relationship with the Lord by seeking to

observe the commandments (*mitzvot*) set forth in the Torah. (*Torah* narrowly refers to the first five books of the Bible [Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy], more broadly it refers to all the biblical books, and most broadly to the scriptures and later rabbinic commentaries on them.)

A distinction is important here. Down through history, some Christian polemicists alleged that Jews were legalistically fixated on observing the commandments in a futile effort to earn divine favor. The reality is rather the reverse: in response to having been chosen by God for a covenant of mutual responsibilities and ethical imperatives, Jews interpret and seek to comply with God’s will as expressed in the *mitzvot*.

## Jewish Messianic Expectations

The concept of a messianic age is a distinctively Jewish contribution to religious thought. The Hebrew word *mashiach*, anglicized as “messiah,” means “anointed one.” In biblical times, it referred to anyone appointed by God to fulfill a specific mission or role. Thus, Temple priests were anointed as such, and monarchs in the line of David were anointed kings of the Israelites. The Bible calls the Persian emperor Cyrus “God’s *mashiach*” because he permitted the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return home to Judah (Isa. 45:1).

In the late Second Temple period, some Jews anticipated that God would send angelic or human agent(s) to rescue the people of Israel from foreign domination and establish peace and justice in the world. These expectations were quite varied, but there is little to no evidence that any Jews speculated about a suffering agent of God until followers of Jesus of Nazareth began to think in such terms in the first century CE.<sup>6</sup>

6. When the followers of Jesus became convinced that the Crucified One had been raised from death, they tried to understand its meaning. Being Jewish, they naturally consulted Israel’s scriptures. They were particularly intrigued by Psalm 22 and passages in Isaiah that came to be called the suffering servant songs (Isa. 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–9; and 52:13–53:12). These texts discuss the fate and significance of the suffering of the righteous. Christians drew on these passages to explain the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and so linked “messiah” and “suffering” together.

Today, all Jewish movements look hopefully toward an Age to Come in which God's peace and justice will reign. More traditional Jews understand that this new world will be somehow heralded by God's messiah or anointed agent, while more liberal Jews tend to think only in terms of a "messianic age."<sup>7</sup>

## The Land of Israel

Some Jews greeted the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948 as the unexpected healing of centuries of exile and dispersion. Part of the biblical covenant was the belief that the children of Israel would live in peace in the Land of Israel. Indeed, life on the Land can be visualized as one point on a triangular diagram of the covenantal relationship, with God and the children of Israel at the other two points. The loss of self-rule in the Land was typically seen as evidence that all was not well with Israel's relationship with God. The long years with no Jewish homeland (although Jews continued to live in the Land under others' rule) seemed to Jews everywhere a kind of exile: something seemed viscerally wrong with this picture.

The sudden resurgence of a Jewish homeland in ancient Jewish territories, especially after the horrific devastation of the Shoah, or

Holocaust,<sup>8</sup> seemed to some Jews as evidence of divine intervention, even though many Orthodox Jews opposed the founding of the State of Israel as premature before the clear arrival of the messiah. Rabbi Henry Siegman has observed that

The State of Israel is the result not only of modern forces of nationalism, or even of the persecution of the Jew. It is that to be sure, but it is above all a consequence of an inner need, a positive impulse working within Jewish life and history. It is the actualization of a quest for authenticity, the incarnation of the Jewish burden of otherness. The Jew is driven by a force as old as the Bible to reunite with the Land. The importance of this "internal" significance of Israel is one which Christians (and Jews) often fail to grasp.<sup>9</sup>

There can be no denying the importance of the Land of Israel for Jewish self-understanding. The well-being of a Jewish homeland shapes Jews' sense of security around the world. However, Jews and others do not agree about whether or how to connect biblical land promises with the existence of a nation-state in the very different geopolitical world of today.

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7. Note these interesting statements in two Vatican documents: "[I]n underlining the eschatological [unfinished] dimension of Christianity we shall reach a greater awareness that the people of God of the Old and the New Testament are tending towards a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah even if they start from two different points of view. It is more clearly understood that the person of the Messiah is not only a point of division for the people of God but also a point of convergence. . . . Thus it can be said that Jews and Christians meet in a comparable hope, grounded on the same promise made to Abraham (Gen.12:1-3; Heb. 6:13-18)"; Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" (1985), II, 10, *ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/234-notes*. Also, "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulus to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us"; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), II,A,5 - §21, *ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/282-pbc-2001*.

8. Biblically, a "holocaust" is the burning of an animal sacrificed to God in prayer, which seems a grotesque way to refer to the Nazi genocide of Jews. Therefore, the Hebrew term *Shoah*, a devastating whirlwind, is often used instead.

9. Henry Siegman, "Ten Years of Catholic-Jewish Relations: A Reassessment," in the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee's *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, 1970-1985: Selected Papers* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), 34.



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The existence of the modern nation-state of Israel in the aftermath of the Second World War has become integral to Jewish identity throughout the world.

The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has expressed this uncertainty in this way:

Christians are invited to understand [Jewish] religious attachment [to the Land of Israel] which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship. The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law. The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design.<sup>10</sup>

How "God's design" for the permanence of the children of Israel relates to the rejection of any religious interpretation of the existence of the State of Israel remains unclear. Or to put it another way, just how the centrality of the Land of Israel for Jews bears on the modern nation-state of Israel according to current international law will likely remain a major topic in the ongoing dialogue among Jews as well as in interreligious dialogue with non-Jews.

## Rabbinic Judaism: Grappling with God

As noted, the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE made it necessary for Jews to adapt to the loss of the central locus of their religious life. This adaptation occurred through the work of teachers known as "rabbis," who were probably somewhat indebted to the traditions of the earlier Pharisees mentioned in the New Testament. The Pharisees were a Jewish movement with some diversity of views, but they all seem to have interpreted oral "traditions of the elders" to encourage Jews to observe Temple purity practices even when not in its environs. For instance, wherever Pharisees gathered at fellowship meals, they observed the ritual purity norms required for entry to the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem. Through such practices, they reasoned, all life could be made holy. This orientation well positioned the Pharisees to begin to cope with the loss of the Temple. Even after the Temple's demise, holiness

10. Vatican, "Notes" (1985), VI, 25.

did not need to vanish from the world. Through study and observance of the Torah, Jews could become a nation of priests, a holy people. The rabbis venerated even those commands that were impossible to fulfill without the Temple and lauded their study. The early rabbis began putting their oral traditions into writing. The first and foundational written text was the Mishnah (“review” or “study”), assembled around 200 CE, which presents debates and discussions about living according to several categories of biblical commandments. In general terms, its six major sections consider the Torah’s commands concerning agriculture, the Sabbath and festivals, marriage and divorce, civil and criminal litigation, sacrificial rites and dietary norms, and ritual purity. Commentaries on the Mishnah over the next few centuries were compiled into two editions of the Talmud (“Instruction” or “Learning”), one prepared in Palestine around 350 CE and the larger prepared in Babylon around 500 CE. This creative work ultimately defined “Rabbinic

Judaism”—a home-centered, prayerful dedication to the biblical commandments and the performance of good works. These rabbinic texts as variously interpreted and applied have set the pace for Judaism and its various movements down to the present day.

As noted, Jewish dedication to observe the Torah is not a robotic act of literalistic mindlessness. A hallmark of Rabbinic Judaism is the awareness that written texts must always be interpreted. No written text can explicitly answer every imaginable question that succeeding generations of readers will bring to it. Thus the rabbis debate with one another about the best understandings of sacred texts, seeing this disputational discourse as true to the very name “Israel”—to grapple with God. In the Talmud and in later writings, generations of sages have conversed with one another across the centuries in a constant “grappling with God” to understand the divine will. The rabbis wrote in two general styles: halakhah, which explores various



The Temple in Jerusalem shortly before its destruction by Roman armies in 70 CE. In the years after its ruin, the rabbis sought to spread holiness among the Jewish people by encouraging the study of the Torah, the offering of prayers, and the performance of the mitzvot.

legal interpretations for proper Torah observance and aggadah, which is a story, legend, or anecdote to make religious or legal points. In the present day, too, the various movements within Judaism will issue responsa, which are responses to contemporary questions that draw upon the wisdom of this tradition of discussion. Debating the interpretation and meaning of sacred texts, then, has become a defining characteristic of Rabbinic Judaism that continues today.

## Forms of Modern Judaism

As the work of the rabbis demonstrates, Judaism's covenantal relationship with God has had different expressions over time. In addition to the different periods in biblical Israel's history, there was the tectonic shift from Temple-centered late-Second Temple Judaism to the gradual development of Rabbinic Judaism into a Torah-based, family-centered, prayerful, and deliberative approach to maintaining Jewish observance, identity, and solidarity.

This living process of adaptation continued into modern times as Jews and other religious communities in the West responded to the European Enlightenment and its philosophical and political consequences. The rise of liberal democracies in which Jews could in principle escape from the ghetto<sup>11</sup> and theoretically participate in society as equal citizens brought new challenges and questions.<sup>12</sup>

Without going into the historical details, with the arrival of more liberal forms of government founded on principles of human rights,

liberal streams of Judaism also arose. In the United States, Reform Judaism was the way of being Jewish that most fully used scientific methods to study the historical and literary contexts of biblical texts. Reform Jews, therefore, generally do not subscribe to the traditional view that God dictated the Torah to Moses. Rather, the Torah was seen to have emerged from within the history of the people of Israel over time. Early Reform Judaism was especially notable for dispensing with Hebrew in favor of vernacular during worship. The use of art and music, which echoed the practice of Christian neighbors, was also in evidence in Reform liturgies. To varying degrees, some Reform Jews questioned Torah commands that seemed more at home in ancient agricultural societies than in the modern world. For example, should rabbinic rules regarding the distance one could walk to synagogue on the Sabbath before it became prohibited labor prevail in a world in which one could drive a car to the synagogue without breaking a sweat? Or should certain food restrictions that developed in cultures unfamiliar with germs hold sway in today's world of pasteurization and adequate cooking?

Grappling with such questions, Orthodox Judaism maintained that Moses received the Torah—the written Torah and the oral Torah—directly from God, who ensured that this teaching was faithfully transmitted down the centuries to rabbinic scribes. Therefore, the Mishnah and Talmud together with the codes of religious practice they engendered, such as the *Shulchan Arukh* (*The Set Table*, by Joseph Karo in the sixteenth century), have decisive authority in shaping the life of Orthodox Jews. Within Jewish

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11. Beginning in 1555, popes, bishops, and other Christian leaders in Europe inaugurated a practice of confining Jews to walled neighborhoods called ghettos. Often locked at night, Jews so confined lived in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions. For the first papal decree concerning ghettos, see Pope Paul IV, *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, July 14, 1555, [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/274-paul-iv](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/274-paul-iv).

12. The qualifiers “in principle” and “theoretically” are used to recognize that anti-Semitism remained a potent force even in liberal democracies. While this has weakened particularly after the Shoah, animus toward Jews still resurges under certain circumstances.

Orthodoxy, there is a spectrum of views ranging from those of the modern Orthodox, who participate fully in contemporary society while maintaining Torah observance, to various groups of Chasidic Jews (*chasid* means “pious one”), who live apart and dress distinctively.

Sometimes seen as a middle road between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, Conservative or Masorti (“Traditional”) Judaism is better understood as a strand of contemporary Judaism that sees the observance of the commandments as evolving and open to multiple legal (or halakhic) approaches. The Torah, for example, is understood as God’s self-disclosure even if expressed by inspired people in human language. The rabbinic tradition is more authoritative for Conservative Jews than for Reform Jews, although the former feel authorized to adapt the mitzvot to changing times after careful consideration. Thus, both Reform and Conservative Jews now ordain women as rabbis. On the other hand, the use of Hebrew in Conservative worship is just as normative as for the Orthodox community.

These movements should be understood as a spectrum of approaches to living the Jewish faith today and not as static or fixed categories. Becoming more aware of the danger of assimilating into the larger society, which could result in a loss of Jewish identity, Reform Judaism is using Hebrew in community liturgies much more today than in the “classical” Reform period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In some places, it is difficult to distinguish between Reform and Conservative congregations.

Another movement called Reconstructionist Judaism developed in the United States in the 1920s–1940s. It tends to maintain Jewish traditional practices, but not for traditional reasons. Rather than seeing the Torah as God’s gift to the children of Israel, Reconstructionist Jews understand it as the Jewish people’s response to God’s presence in all of creation. Thus the commandments or mitzvot are constructs of the Jewish

people, but they should be observed because they are a systematic response to God’s desire for people to be holy.

Christians and other non-Jews might see this diversity within Judaism today as contiguous with the diverse Judaisms of previous eras and evidence of Judaism’s vitality and adaptability. It is important to recall that Judaism is both a “religion” and a “peoplehood.” Therefore, the sense of communal responsibility and identity remains strong even among Jews for whom faith in God is unimportant and who do not formally participate in the religious practices of any of the Jewish movements.

## Humanity in God’s Image

Both Judaism and Christianity recognize the One God as the Creator who creates and sustains all things. Both also strongly embrace the biblical perspective that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–27). In fact, this axiom is the foundation of much of the ethical thought in both traditions.

Judaism and Christianity differ significantly, however, in their respective “theological anthropologies,” or how they each conceive of the relationship between God’s goodness and humanity’s ability to sin. The idea of a primordial Fall as the primary cause of human sinfulness, based on a certain reading of Genesis 2–3, is far less prominent in Judaism than in Christianity.

Postbiblical Judaism instead sees human behavior as resulting from the tension between two conflicting “tendencies” within each human person: the *yetzer hatov* (literally, the inclination to good) and the *yetzer hara* (literally, the inclination to evil). But the meanings of these Hebrew phrases are more subtle than literal renderings suggest.

The *yetzer hara* is better understood as the impulse to satisfy personal needs, to achieve one’s

desires. Without such ambition, people would not be driven to eat, build or innovate, succeed or excel. In discussing Genesis 1:31 (“And God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good”), a rabbinic commentator observed, “‘good’ refers to the *yetzer hatov*, but ‘very good’ refers to the *yetzer hara*. Why? Because were it not for the *yetzer hara* no one would build a house, take a wife, give birth, or engage in commerce.”<sup>13</sup>

But since unrestrained ambition leads to evil deeds, it is the function of the *yetzer hatov* to channel it into constructive purposes. Rabbinic tradition sees children as lacking the impulse to good. Therefore, they need parental restriction on their desires until puberty when the *yetzer hatov* becomes active within them. For Jewish children, this coincides with their initiation into adulthood and their commitment to living according to the Torah, which enhances their inclination to the good.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Judaism sees no need for a savior to rescue people from a fallen state of wretchedness. Rather, people must learn to balance their ambitions with their moral sense. The study of the Torah guides Jews in pursuing this ethical equilibrium.

## Jewish Liturgical Life

The most important holy day for Jews is the weekly observance of the Sabbath (*shabbat*). The creation narrative at the start of the book of Genesis ends as follows: “The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy,

because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done” (Gen. 2:1–3).

Thus, the Jewish seventh day, the Sabbath, which runs from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, is to be set apart from the other days. On the Sabbath, Jews are to avoid everyday labor and devote themselves to prayer and reflection on the Torah. The Sabbath also anticipates the ultimate destiny of all things, the Age to Come (*olam haba*), when the peace and just rule of God will embrace all creation.

Formal Jewish congregational life also has an annual cycle of worship, which, for many Jews, proceeds through the entire text of the five books of the Torah in weekly portions. This annual cycle of biblical readings begins and ends in the early autumn with the festival of Simchat Torah (Torah Rejoicing). On this day the beginning of the book of Genesis and the conclusion of the book of Deuteronomy are read aloud. Then as the months pass, a series of major and minor holy days unfolds.

The Jewish liturgical year is based upon a lunar calendar, which requires an additional thirteenth month seven times in nineteen years to coordinate with the seasons and the solar calendar. Thus, Jewish feasts do not occur on the same day, or even necessarily within the same month, as the days on the standard solar calendar. The most important annual holy days in the Jewish liturgical year are as follows:

**Rosh Hashanah.** This holy day, which marks the start of the Jewish New Year, is the beginning of a ten-day period of reflection on the past year, known as the Days of Awe or the High Holy Days. This self-reflection then leads to repentance and prayers for the forgiveness of sins.

**Yom Kippur.** Also called the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur is the most solemn day of the

13. *Genesis Rabbah*, IX, 7.

14. For more on this point, see [myjewishlearning.com/life/Life\\_Events/BarBat\\_Mitzvah/About\\_BarBat\\_Mitzvah/Age\\_Requirement/Good\\_Inclination.shtml](http://myjewishlearning.com/life/Life_Events/BarBat_Mitzvah/About_BarBat_Mitzvah/Age_Requirement/Good_Inclination.shtml).



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A Jewish family sets up a sukkah, or tent, to celebrate the autumnal harvest festival of Sukkot.

Jewish year. The day is spent in prayer and fasting, with promises to God for future good deeds and reconciliation with fellow human beings. This holy day concludes the ten-day period of repentance known as the High Holy Days, which are celebrated in September or October.

**Sukkot (Festival of Booths).** During this autumn harvest festival, Jews eat their meals in a tent or *sukkah*, a temporary outside dwelling they build for the occasion.

**Pesach (Passover).** Celebrated in March or April, this holy day recalls the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The most important event is the Seder, when the story of the Exodus is retold and foods are served that symbolize aspects of the flight from Egypt, most notably the unleavened bread or *matzah*.

**Shavuot (Festival of Weeks).** Held in May or June, and also known as Pentecost, this festival commemorates the end of the early grain

harvest and Moses' receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

These major holy days are accompanied by minor observances, including Simchat Torah mentioned above. Hanukkah, the festival of lights in December, marks the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after it had been captured by a Syrian king in the second century BCE. Tisha B'Av is a summertime commemoration of the destruction of both the First Temple (by the Babylonians) and the Second Temple (by the Romans).

## From Contempt to Fellowship

Tragically, and probably because of their organic connections, the history of relations between Christians and Jews has been mostly antagonistic. In the early centuries of the church's existence,

Christian leaders had to defend themselves against unflattering comparisons with venerable and frequently admired Judaism. In fact, some voices in the Roman intelligentsia challenged the very existence of Christianity by demanding to know why Christians, who acknowledged the divine inspiration of the Jewish scriptures by including them in their own sacred canon, did not themselves keep the commandments given in the Torah by God.<sup>15</sup> Such critics derided the church as a superstitious mutation of Judaism.

In response, Christian apologists sought to delegitimize the Judaism against which the church was being invidiously contrasted. Using contemporary rhetorical customs, they claimed that Jews, who had in the past been God's special people, no longer enjoyed that status, having been replaced or superseded by Christians. Drawing upon certain New Testament passages such as Matthew 27:25, these Christian leaders argued that the crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem had brought a divine curse upon Jews, as manifested by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Moreover, they insisted that Jewish observance of the commands of the Torah was a stubborn clinging to archaic customs because the "Law of Moses" had been replaced by the universal command of Christ to love one another. This argument was supported by out-of-context readings of the New Testament letters written by Paul of Tarsus. His words about whether Gentiles joining the early churches should be required to take on full Torah observance were construed to suggest that Jews were myopically fixated on legalistic efforts to obey commands that no human being could entirely fulfill.

This basic orientation toward Jews and Judaism is today named "supersessionism," meaning that its various theological assertions are premised on the conviction that Christians have superseded Jews as God's people because of the crucifixion of Jesus, therefore making post-New Testament Rabbinic Judaism obsolete and misguided. This decisive negative stance toward Judaism developed when Christianity was inferior and weak, but it became a fixed perspective in the Christian imagination—not critiqued until the twentieth century—when the relative social status of Judaism and Christianity was reversed in the Roman Empire. After Christianity became the preferred imperial religion in the fourth and fifth centuries, it began to use its newfound legal power to weaken its Jewish rival's influence in Roman society.

Supersessionism thus became embedded in Christianity and contributed to the marginalization of Jews in the European "Christendom" that emerged after the collapse of the western Roman Empire. A certain ambivalence toward Jews prevailed in medieval Europe. While Judaism was tolerated and not suppressed, unlike all other religions in Europe, Jews were conceived of as homeless "witness people" doomed to inferior status in Christian society.<sup>16</sup>

It would be simplistic to draw a straight line between Christian supersessionism and the Nazi genocide of Jews in World War II. Nevertheless, after the war many Christian churches began to examine the history of anti-Jewish teaching and critiqued supersessionism in a formal and sustained way. An extremely authoritative repudiation of anti-Judaism teaching was issued by

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15. See, e.g., R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Celsus on the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. section III.

16. Augustine of Hippo was very influential in this regard. He applied Psalm 59:11 ("Do not slay them, lest my people be unmindful; with your power make wanderers of them") to Jews—Christians must not kill Jews because in their homelessness they give witness to the fate that befalls unfaithful people. In their dispersion Jews also bring the Old Testament with them, which foretells the coming of Christianity and so prepares pagans for the arrival of Christian missionaries. (See *De Civitate Dei*, ch. 46.)

the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council in 1965 when it declared,

[N]either all Jews indiscriminately at that time [of Jesus], nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy scripture. Consequently, all must take care, lest in catechizing [teaching] or in preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Other churches also grappled with past hostile teachings about Jews, according to their own governance structures and procedures. Very notable is the 1994 declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which rejected the anti-Semitic sentiments of Martin Luther:

In the spirit of [Martin Luther's] truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the sixteenth century, we reject this

violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.<sup>18</sup>

In the decades since World War II, a new relationship based on respect and accurate understanding has begun to grow between the Jewish and Christian communities in many parts of the world. Those involved in interreligious dialogue have had to grapple with long-lived stereotypes and caricatures widespread among both Christians and Jews because the history of hostility between them.

However, because of the developments of the past few decades, Jews and Christians today live in an unprecedented era of collaboration and dialogue. Many involved in building this new relationship draw inspiration from these words of Blessed John Paul II: "As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world [cf. Gen. 12:2ff]. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another."<sup>19</sup>

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17. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," October 28, 1965, §4, [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/293-nostra-aetate](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/293-nostra-aetate).

18. ELCA Church Council, "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community," April 18, 1994, [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na/lutheran/676-elca94apr18](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/na/lutheran/676-elca94apr18).

19. John Paul II, "On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," April 6, 1993, [ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/313-jp2-93apr6](http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/313-jp2-93apr6).