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ARE JEWS THE ONLY TRUE MONOTHEISTS? SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS IN JEWISH THOUGHT FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE PRESENT

David B. Ruderman*

ABSTRACT: Monotheism, by simple definition, implies a belief in one God for all peoples, not for one particular nation. But as the *Shemah* prayer recalls, God spoke exclusively to Israel in insisting that God is one. This address came to define the essential nature of the Jewish faith, setting it apart from all other faiths both in the pre-modern and modern worlds. This essay explores the positions of a variety of thinkers on the question of the exclusive status of monotheism in Judaism from the Renaissance until the present day. It first discusses the challenge offered to Judaism by the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola and his notion of ancient theology which claimed a common core of belief among all nations and cultures. It then explores the impact of this universal philosophy of Christianity on a group of early modern Jewish thinkers; considers its repercussions among Jewish thinkers in the nineteenth century both in Western and Eastern Europe; and finally focuses on one contemporary Jewish reflection of the vision of Pico in our own day.

Monotheism, by simple definition, implies a belief in one God for all peoples, not for one particular nation. The Jews might have claimed the privilege of conceiving and bringing the doctrine to the world in its original form, but ultimately, it is only meaningful when it transcends its own particular socio-religious setting, when it addresses the condition of all human beings and all cultures. But as the *Shemah* prayer recalls, God spoke exclusively to Israel in insisting that God is one. This address came to define the essential nature of the Jewish faith, setting it apart from all other faiths both in the pre-modern and modern worlds.

The issue of whether Judaism's vision of monotheistic faith is unique or not is related to another question: If the one God spoke only to Israel, how might we define the faiths of Islam and Christianity? Can they also claim to be monotheistic on an equal footing with Jewish monotheism? Was Sinai an exclusively Jewish experience not to be shared by other faiths or was it merely the font of a universal revelation of one God to all three religions? This in turn is directly linked to the ontological status of the non-Jew in Jewish thought. By recognizing Christianity and Islam as monotheistic faiths, the status of the believer in both religions had to be re-thought from a Jewish perspective and elevated above the non-believing pagans.

I could easily begin with several medieval formulations of the issue, especially that of Moses Maimonides, Menahem ha-Meiri, and others,[1] but I have chosen instead to open

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this conversation at a critical moment in the history of Western thought during the Renaissance period. I refer specifically to the challenge offered to contemporary Jews by the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola and his notion of ancient theology or *prisca theologia*, the doctrine that asserts that a single true theology was given by God to humanity in antiquity and presently threads through all religions and cultures. Pico, together with his colleague Marsilio Ficino, concluded, on the basis of their discovery of ancient pagan and Jewish sources, that this common core of belief, indeed a monotheistic one when interpreted correctly, can be located among all civilizations and is not the sole possession of any one religion. Pico's formulation of ancient theology posed a unique threat to the continuity of Jewish national existence. He introduced Jews for the first time to the image of a universal cultural experience transcending either Christianity in its present form or Judaism. He argued for a new religious cosmopolitanism in which all separatisms would be obliterated, and the best of every nation and culture, including Judaism, would be fused into a collective human spirit. With Pico and with Renaissance culture in general, Jews entered for the first time into a new dialogue with the western world.[2]

In Pico's lifetime and after, several Jewish thinkers noticed this novel formulation and felt the need to embrace it, or to polemicize with it, or to temper the not undisguised Christian appropriation of other religious cultures under the alleged banner of a universal faith. I offer briefly three interesting illustrations of those who essentially concurred with some form of the notion of ancient theology. The most well-known is that of Leone Ebreo, that is, Judah Abravanel, in his *Dialoghi d'Amore*. The work has been studied by many scholars. I will only remark here that Leone appears to accept at face value the notion of ancient theology, upholding a vision of the commonality of all humanity and its faith. Leone never denied his Jewish background but the *Dialoghi* is a work written for all human beings, not Jews alone. He could affirm Judaism while at the same time citing pagan myths and even Christian sources. Like Spinoza after him (who held a copy of Leone's book in his own library), Leone believed that the Jewish faith was most relevant when it transcended its own exclusivity, when it became the province of all human beings and all nations.[3]

An even more explicit example of the impact of ancient theology on Jewish thought is that of Abraham Yagel in his *Beit Ya'ar Ha-Levanon*. In this text, a reworking of a text found in Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's writing, Yagel writes: "The important sages among the gentiles, who never saw the lights neither of the Torah nor of worship, prophecy,

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[1] The literature on this subject is vast. See, for example, Gerald Blidstein, "Maimonides and Me'iri on the Legitimacy of Non-Judaic Religions," in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction of Judaism with Other Cultures,* ed. Leo Landman (New York: Yeshivah University Press, 1990), 27-35; David Novak, "Gentiles in Rabbinic Thought," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Steven T. Katz, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 647-62; Christine Hayes, "The 'Other' in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature,* ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 243-68; and, of course, the pioneering study of Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), especially 159-77.

[2] This is a brief summary of my earlier formulation of the challenge of Pico to Jewish thought which I still think is valid. See David B. Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms and Legacies*, ed. Albert Rabil, Jr. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 1:382–433. For more recent work on Pico, see, for example, M. V. Dougherty, ed., *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* (Cambridge**:** Cambridge University Press, 2008), and the essay by Brian Copenhaver on Pico in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* with an additional recent bibliography: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pico-della-mirandola/

[3] See my discussion in Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," 407-12, and the earlier scholarship I cite there. For more recent work, see the essay by Aaron Hughes in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and its accompanying bibliography: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abrabanel/

wonders, and miracles [acknowledged the idea of one God] … Listen to what these sages spoke about the creator." He then proceeds to cite monotheistic passages of Orpheus, Zoroaster, Apuleius, and concludes with "the great Hermes and his prayer to God as he wrote it at the end of the first chapter of the Pimander." This prayer, Yagel adds "is close to what is found in the Torah of Moses, if one understands all the details of its statements precisely, without the intrusion of any false thoughts, doubt or suspicion."[4]

One final example is that of an Italian Jewish thinker of the seventeenth- century, Judah Del Bene in his *Kissot le-Beit David*. Del Bene perhaps offers the most authentic expression of the internalization of Catholic attitudes by an Italian Jewish writer proud of his Jewish heritage but nevertheless convinced that his Jewish identity is intimately linked to the spiritual and political fate of his Catholic neighbours. He sees their faith as almost identical with the Jewish one; he sees their mission to "the far-off islands" as a form of teaching Torah to the world; he views their enemies, especially the Ottoman Turks, as his own; and he is even envious of the way they educate themselves and produce their own rich monastic culture. Here is Del Bene on Catholic missionaries spreading the gospel: "Even if they do not observe the words of the Torah as we do today, nevertheless, they still believe that it is the Torah from heaven that was given at Sinai by Moses … For it was God's holy will to awaken a spirit in men of very good virtues, masters of a language spoken according to the Torah today who are called Christians to spread out afar a net to those distant islands and to succeed in their purpose."[5]

In the eighteenth century, the crisis of Jewish life revolved around the "sin" of hybridity, or what I have called elsewhere mingled identities, of a dilution and blurring of pure faith by the mingling of elements of Christianity with Judaism and with even Islam. Boundary crossing not merely anti-nomianism, as Pawel Maciejko has argued in expanding Gershom Scholem's position, was the real heresy of the Sabbateans, as well as that of lapsed conversos, individual converts, Christian Hebraists and even former Jews who had become evangelical missionaries. Figures such as Jonathan Eibeshütz, Nehemiah Ḥayon, Johannes Kemper, Jacob Frank and others created syncretistic notions of monotheism that undermined the undiluted purity of a true orthodox Jewish faith. Conversos and individual converts straddled the fence between confessions while Christian Hebraists, evangelicals, and other Christians infatuated with Judaism erected new edifices of faith resting on a merger of the two religions. The heresy hunters and the beleaguered rabbinate felt threatened since the clear-cut boundaries separating pure Jewish faith from a Christian one had blatantly been breached. I have offered elsewhere numerous examples of this phenomenon of blended faiths and hybrid formulations of Judaism and Christianity as they emerged conspicuously in the early modern period.[6]

I might add one more remarkable case from a later period here taken from my most recent research project on missionaries and apostasy in the nineteenth century. Stanislas Hoga was a Polish Jew who converted to Catholicism and then evangelical Protestantism in

[4] See David B. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, Ma.**:** Harvard University Press, 1988), 139-60 (especially 144-48) where the passage and its sources from *Beit Ya'ar ha-Levanon* are fully discussed.

[5] See David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 185-98, especially 195.

[6] See David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 159-89; and Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755-1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

the first half of the nineteenth century. Coming under the influence of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews, he began to work for the learned missionary Alexander McCaul who asked him to translate his well-known assault into Hebrew which was called *Netivot Olam* (entitled *The Old Paths* in the English original). The book caused a sensation among European Jews and evoked strong rebuttals on the part of several well-known Eastern European *Maskilim*. What is less known about the enigmatic Hoga was that he apparently later regretted his affiliation with the London Society and their efforts to missionize among Jews. He subsequently published several works in English in which he openly ridiculed their meager efforts to convert his former co-religionists and their ill-conceived position that the *halacha* of the rabbis should be abrogated. On the contrary, Hoga argued, a Jew like him who believes in Christianity is still a Jew, and Jews could and should continue to practice Jewish ritual. The assault on Talmudic law by McCaul and his colleagues was simply wrong; Jesus had come to uphold the law not to destroy it and thus Christian faith and Jewish ritual practice could be meaningfully merged in the modern era.[7]

Acknowledging the social status and dignity of the Christian went hand in hand with an appreciation of the legitimacy of his monotheistic faith. Jewish apologetics of the nineteenth century focus on distinguishing contemporary Christianity from ancient paganism. The distinction only made sense when Jews recognized that their Christian neighbours had legitimate faith systems as valid as that of Judaism, at least for them. By conceding the simple fact that Christianity was monotheistic and not pagan, Jews were seemingly obliged to relinquish their exclusive claim to be the true monotheists.

Yet in this same era, one particular group of Jews offered the primary resistance to the notion of blended faiths and religious boundary crossings, insisting instead that only Judaism offered an ideologically pure form of monotheism to the world. They were primarily but not exclusively Liberal Jews who had considerably diminished the collective demands of halakhic practice in favour of the personal autonomy of one's individual faith. For them, what remained uniquely Jewish was the idea of one God. Jewish monotheism, so they claimed, was even the original faith of Jesus and was later corrupted by the Church fathers and the Catholic Church. Judaism was admittedly not the only monotheism but it was the earliest, the most authentic, and the most perfect form that had ever existed in the history of humankind. An entire pantheon of Jewish thinkers, primarily German ones, from the beginning of the nineteenth well into the twentieth century justified the existence of the Jewish people in Western civilization as bearers of this unique monotheistic formulation. I need only recall the well-known writings of Immanuel Wolf, Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, Nachman Krochmel, Herman Cohen, and Leo Baeck, among others. The Reform Jewish ideologues in this group who had abandoned an unwavering commitment to Jewish ceremonial law felt especially compelled to argue that Judaism was still unique even without *halakha* and could be differentiated from Christianity as a result of its singular version of monotheism. They took a stringent polemical stance against

[7] See Beth-Zion Lask Abrahams, "Stanislaus Hoga: Apostate and Penitent," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 15 (1939-1945): 121-14; and David B. Ruderman, "Towards a Preliminary Portrait of an Evangelical Missionary to the Jews: The Many Faces of Alexander McCaul (1799-1863)," *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 47 (2015), 48-69.

Christianity, insisting on the separation of Christianity from the body-politic and the need to define a Jewish faith in opposition to a Christian one.[8]

This position seems to be argued as well by a group of *Maskilim* in eastern Europe - I refer to the less examined writings of Samuel Joseph Fuenn, Isaac Baer Levinsohn, and Eliezer Zweifel in their strong defence of the rabbis and the Talmud against Alexander McCaul and missionaries. The original monotheism and who actually conceived it and protected its purity becomes a critical concern for them as well in defining a unique space for Judaism within Western civilization. This became especially acute when the missionaries argued that Jews cannot be true monotheists nor fully integrated into European society without giving up on rabbinic theology and practice. The political discourse about which Jews are worthy of emancipation and which are not became intertwined with the theological discourse on what is the authentic monotheism and who is the real creator and embodiment of its truth.[9]

In our own day and age, one for some of post-denominationalism and a call for a spirituality and religiosity that transcends confessional faiths, the old debate about monotheism seems to have faded. The Judeo-Christian heritage no longer offends Jewish thinkers as it once did only a generation ago in Arthur Cohen's powerful polemic against the seemingly hyphenated relationship between the two religions.[10] On the contrary, with the new assault on Islam as an alleged incubator of terrorism and radicalism, the blended relationship between Judaism and Christianity appears all the more accentuated. The myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as Cohen called it, fails to unsettle many thinkers, Christians or Jews alike. Instead we have more or less accepted the notion that there is no authentic or antique form of monotheism superior to other forms and that we all share one God and one universal faith. If Judaism is to remain unique, it can no longer claim a superior faith in one God; instead, it must rely on halachic commitment, or on ethnic or national ties, or on family nostalgia, or on Holocaust memory. Jews can no longer claim an exclusive claim for the birth and evolution of monotheism. It is no longer the private treasure of the Jewish people – rather it is their gift to all humankind and binds them rather than separates them from their fellow human-beings. To some contemporary Jews, Pico's idyllic vision of ancient theology appears all the more satisfying connecting the best of Jewish ideas with Christian ones and justifying a fellowship of merged faith and mingled identities.

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[8] A small sampling of a vast literature on the subject might include Immanuel Wolf, "On the Concept of a Science of Judaism," *Leo Baeck Yearbook* II (1957): 194-204; Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Ismar Schorsch, "Ideology and History in the Age of Emancipation," in *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, by Heinrich Graetz, ed. Ismar Schorsch (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975), 1-62; Jay Harris, *Nachman Krochmel, Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), chapter 2; Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1958); Walter Jacob, *Christianity Through Jewish Eyes: The Quest for Common Ground* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1974); Marc Krell, *Intersecting Pathways: Modern Jewish Theologians in Conversation with Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Christian Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), part 3.

[9] I am presently working on the responses of these three thinkers to the assault of Alexander McCaul against rabbinic Judaism and their attempts to defend the integrity of Judaism and its uniqueness in Western civilization. They include: Samuel Joseph Fuenn, *Darkei Adonai*. Ms. Heb. 8390, National Library of Israel; Isaac Beer Levensohn, *Aḥiyah Shiloni Ha-Hozeh: Kollel Bittul Ta'anotov shel Sefer Netivot Olam* (Leipzig, 1864); Isaac Beer Levensohn , *Zerubavel … [Neged] Da'at Rosh Mastineinu … Be-Sifro Netivot Olam (*Warsaw, 1878); and Eliezer Zweifel, *Sanigor* (Warsaw, 1885).

[10] Arthur A. Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

In this connection, I would like to close my survey with a consideration of the contemporary American Jewish thinker Shaul Magid who is known for his work on kabbalistic and Hasidic thought but has in recent years taken up the role of the theologian of post-denominationalism and Jewish renewal in the American Jewish community, especially expounding the positions of Zalman Shachter-Shlomi and Shlomo Carlebach and arguing for their relevance for the era in which we live. Before summarizing his theological stance, I should point out parenthetically that even his most recent historical work on the incarnational theology of Hasidism points out how Judaism adopted a theology uncannily close to Christianity without recognizing it as such.[11]

Magid begins by reviewing some of the history we have just discussed. His reiteration is useful in contextualizing his novel position amongst the other thinkers discussed above. He claims that "in the nineteenth century, the tendency was to value uniform cultures over heteronymous ones. In religion, that tendency led to a belief in the myth of pure, unadulterated revelatory systems. As a type of hybridity, syncretism was a pejorative term mostly relegated to 'oriental' religions that did not make exclusivist claims, and were thus considered inferior religions. Modern Jewish thinkers, even the more progressive and historicist thinkers, tended to present Judaism as a coherent belief system and avoided the notion of syncretism as a phenomenon in the history of Judaism."

Magid continues: "In a multicultural world, however, syncretism has taken on a positive valence. Blending is viewed not as 'defiling' but as enhancing a particular religion. The phenomenologist of religion Gerhard van der Leeuw has suggested that religions are in constant flux and thus borrowing is a natural part of religion's own dynamism. Multiculturalism pushes particularistic societies to abandon their master narratives and theories of 'uniqueness' in favour of an orientation that acknowledges, and supports, borrowing from one another while maintaining distinct, but not exclusivist, identities. While historicism may sometimes undermine the mythic construct of uniqueness, it often erects in its place an ostensibly 'factual/historical' construct of distinctiveness that is still exclusivist in orientation. In existing Jewish denominations built on the historicist model, Judaism is still by and for Jews and theories of Jewish chosenness are still defended. In Jewish Renewal's syncretistic model, Judaism is constructed by Jews but what Judaism has to offer is not necessarily limited to Jews; the boundaries of Judaism itself have become permeable."

"As I see it," Magid argues, "only in Jewish Renewal's syncretistic post-denominational approach does Judaism move in a direction that suggests both an ideological and functional universalism. This non-exclusivist particularism frees Judaism to view itself as one of many societies, and one of many spiritualities, each of which has a role to play in the order of the world. When Judaism no longer needs to defend its uniqueness (theologically or historically) it can more comfortably view itself as a partner in humanity. While it is true that the permeability of boundaries threatens the survival of any distinct

[11] Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015). On Magid's post-denominationalism, see his *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013). For a succinct summary of his position, see his post, "A Perspective on Jewish Renewal," on the website of the Network of Spiritual Progressives (http://spiritualprogressives.org/newsite/?p=655). I have conveniently utilized this text in summarizing his position here.

community, the multicultural model that promotes an ideology of 'mutual recognition' and respect is a buffer against that danger. In this regard I think Jewish Renewal takes multiculturalism more seriously than other American Jewish alternatives. Its universalism is not some prophetic or messianic utopianism relegated to a redemptive future, but part of the way Judaism needs to be lived in the here-and-now. Instead of simply assimilating into a pre-existing Americanism as the Reform movement did, Jewish Renewal creates a religious framework in dialogue with other religious currents in America. Instead of offering Judaism as a separate sphere of religious practice, Jewish Renewal offers a blending of Judaism with other spiritual practices in order to construct a more complex and sensitive religious alternative that is aligned with American sensibilities garnered from a counter-culture now mainstreamed."[12]

In concluding with Magid's radical formulation of Judaism and its faith in the era in which we live, I do not wish to imply that he is correct, that his is the final word, and that his call for post-denominationalism resonates widely among other Jewish thinkers, leaders, and laity. I assume it does not, or at least not yet. My goal in closing with his contemporary perspective was simply to chart the legacy of Pico's theological syncretism in Jewish thought over five centuries and to argue that it was enthusiastically embraced by an interesting group of thinkers throughout the early modern period but fiercely contested by anti-Sabbatean rabbis in the eighteenth century and by Reform ones in the nineteenth. Perhaps Magid is right that we live in an age which no longer values uniform cultures or pure, unadulterated revelatory systems; syncretism and blended identities have become the norm; and in the future, all barriers separating Jewish religious culture from those of other communities, especially Christian ones, will ultimately disappear. But has he sufficiently factored in the hostility of so many to Jews and Judaism in the world we inhabit, even when Jews seek the universal path he espouses; and has he considered adequately the stubborn persistence of religious and cultural boundary maintenance on the part of many Jews throughout the world, including those living on the North American continent? In not claiming any expertise in constructive theology, I will leave it to others to evaluate the cogency of his provocative opinions. I can only state as a mere historian that Magid's position has a long pedigree and that despite the enormous differences between Pico's and our world, certain continuities remarkably persist.

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[12] The citations in the last three paragraphs are from Magid, "A Perspective on Jewish Renewal," from the section entitled "Historicism vs. Syncretism."

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