

2005

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's 'Confrontation': A Reassessment

Marshall J. Breger

The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.edu/scholar>

 Part of the [Religion Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Marshall J. Breger, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's 'Confrontation': A Reassessment, 1 *STUD. CHRISTIAN-JEWISH REL.* 151 (2005).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CUA Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Articles and Other Contributions by an authorized administrator of CUA Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact edinger@law.edu.

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers in Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

A Reassessment of Rav Soloveitchik's Essay on Interfaith Dialogue: "Confrontation"

Marshall J. Breger

Columbus School of Law, Catholic University of America

Volume 1 (2005-2006): pp. 151-169

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol1/iss1/art18>

Introduction¹

We recently passed the fortieth anniversary of Rabbi Soloveitchik's magisterial essay on interreligious dialogue, *Confrontation*.² Rabbi Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was the leading modern Orthodox religious authority in America during his lifetime and his religious opinions and rulings are still considered authoritative by American orthodoxy. That he is called the Rav (the Rabbi) by many reflects this high standing. His 1964 essay on interreligious dialogue has defined the orthodox community's approach to dialogue with other religions, in particular Roman Catholicism. Indeed, many in the orthodox community have viewed the essay as a legal decision or *psak halacha*³ and some have referred to it as the "Soloveitchik Line."⁴ Three years ago Rabbi Eugene Korn provided a probing reassessment of that essay in a symposium on the question of interfaith dialogue sponsored

by Boston College.⁵ That reassessment in turn brought forth further comments.⁶ Below are some of my own reactions to this ongoing debate.

Soloveitchik's essay presents a complex argument based on a moral anthropology embedded in an interpretation of the biblical account of the creation of man.⁷ The article develops three paradigms of human nature. The first paradigm is that of man as a natural creature.⁸ In that state, "[h]e fails to realize his great capacity for winning freedom from an unalterable natural order and offering this very freedom as the great sacrifice to God, who wills man to be free in order that he may commit himself unreservedly and forfeit his freedom."⁹

The second paradigm presents man in the confrontational or normative state.¹⁰ He separates himself from nature and "discovers an awesome and mysterious domain of things and events which is independent of and disobedient to him.... In the wake of this discovery, he discovers himself." As a result of that self-discovery and its opposition with "a non-I outside," the divine norm is born: "And the Lord God commanded the man."¹¹

¹ I want to thank Claire Morisset for research assistance, and Rabbi Jack Bemporad and A.G. Harmon for their careful reading of an earlier version of the text.

² Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6/2 (1964): 5ff., available at <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/soloveitchik/>.

³ As are clearly the *piskej halacha* of Rav Moshe Feinstein. See David Ellenson, "A Jewish Legal Authority Addresses Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *American Jewish Archives* 52/1-2 (2000):112ff. One should note on this point David Hartman's description of the Rav's essay "as a rare theological responsum carrying the weight of a halakhic decision. None of R. Soloveitchik's other theological writings were understood to have the authority of Halakhah" [David Hartman, *Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2004), 132].

⁴ Norman Solomon, "The 'Soloveitchik Line' on Dialogue" in Dan Cohn-Sherbok ed., *Problems in Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991), 225.

⁵ Eugene Korn, "The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting 'Confrontation' After Forty Years." http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/Korn_23Nov03.htm.

Rabbi Korn has since published an updated version, "The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting 'Confrontation'," *Modern Judaism* 25/2 (2005):290-315.

⁶ <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/#2>

⁷ "Confrontation," 5-17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Finally, the third paradigm is that of reciprocal confrontation, based on readings of the relationship between Adam and Eve and Jacob and Esau,¹²

At this level, man finds himself confronted again. Only this time it is not the confrontation of a subject who gazes, with a sense of superiority, at the object beneath him, but of two equal subjects, both lonely in their otherness and uniqueness, both opposed and rejected by an objective order, both craving for companionship. This confrontation is reciprocal, not unilateral. This time the two confronters stand alongside each other, each admitting the existence of the other. An aloof existence is transformed into a together-existence.¹³

From this theological understanding of the development of human nature Soloveitchik concludes that the faith experience is private and incommunicable. Building on that argument he determines that proposals for interreligious dialogue are analytically flawed and should be proscribed.

Eugene Korn, in turn, suggests that sociological and philosophical changes in Western society since the writing of "Confrontation" warrant a reassessment of the proscription against interreligious dialogue, especially in light of the Catholic Church's abandonment of its doctrine of supersession.

This paper will examine first the structural logic of Soloveitchik's argument. It will then explore the intellectual and sociological background and assumptions which undergird his approach. Finally, I briefly discuss what I see as the virtues of interreligious dialogue.

¹² Ibid., 14.

¹³ Ibid.

1. Soloveitchik's Argument

A. The Suggestion that Interreligious Dialogue is Flawed because Belief is Incommensurable.

According to one view, in "Confrontation" Soloveitchik is making an epistemological argument that faith claims are ultimately incommensurable and must be taken for what they are, faith claims.¹⁴ Thus he states: "The great encounter between God and man is a wholly personal private affair incomprehensible to the outsider"¹⁵ and "The divine message is incommunicable since it defies all standardized media of information and all objective categories."¹⁶ Perhaps this approach reflects Soloveitchik's analogy to the encounter between Adam and Eve where Soloveitchik explains that "the closer two individuals get to know each other, the more aware they become of the metaphysical distance separating them."¹⁷ He further tells us that this is true "even to a brother of the same faith community."¹⁸

We must be clear that when Soloveitchik refers to incommensurability he is actually talking about a limited class of religious language. He appears to be arguing that the language of religious claims is a language whose words "refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations."¹⁹ The only way this could

¹⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), Sec. 243 at 89^e, says it is akin to a private "diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation." See also, Sec. 258 at 92^e and the reference to "private sensations."

make sense is if Soloveitchik were referring to the religious sensory experience itself, and not to Jewish theology or even the “life form” of Judaism, to use a Wittgensteinian term.

The issue of the possibility of a “private language” is extremely controversial and has engendered considerable philosophical literature.²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein argued against the possibility of a private language in his 1953 book *Philosophical Investigations*.²¹ As Stewart Candlish has written, “[t]he essence of the argument is simple. It is that a language in principle unintelligible to anyone but its user would necessarily be unintelligible to the user also, because no meanings could be established for its signs. ... The conclusion is that it is impossible for a private linguist to establish and maintain a rule for the use of an expression, so that meaning is unobtainable in a private language.”²² At best, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that the private language concept might be available for the recodation of speech that refers to an individual’s own sensations.²³

The opportunity of applying any kind of ‘private language’ to religious claims, however, has been critiqued by Kai Nielsen who argues that *even if* religious language reflects a distinct “form of life”²⁴ (which suggests that no one but a

believer can criticize a particular religion), this does not preclude our asking about the coherence of the concepts involved and about the reality of what its members have conceptualized. As Nielsen points out, “The need to start from ‘inside’ need not preclude the recognition of clefs, inconsistencies, and elements of incoherence in the very practice (form of life).”²⁵

Some, like David Berger, have tried to salvage Soloveitchik’s notion of incommensurability by suggesting that while the “intellectual apprehension” of faith, in contrast to the “personal experience” of faith, can be communicated, such communication “is pitifully inadequate.”²⁶ In contrast, others like Rabbi Irving Greenberg argue that

[I]n matters doctrinal and theological, all religions spoke their own private language. It would be a violation of the spiritual-theological intimacy between the religious community and God to share the content of the internal conversation with members of another faith. Translating the categories of faith into terminology comprehensible to believers of another tradition would be a betrayal.²⁷

Thus, Jews can ‘talk’ the language of Jewish theology to Jews, but not to Christians.

²⁰ See, e.g., John V. Canfield, ed., *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Vol. 9: *The Private Language Argument* (New York: Garland, 1986), especially the essays by Ayer (p. 1), Kenny (pp. 130 and 208), and Anscombe (p. 316).

²¹ See note 19.

²² Stewart Candlish, “Private Language Argument,” in Edward Craig ed., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. 7: 693-698.

²³ Wittgenstein, Sec. 243 at 88^e-89^e.

²⁴ Kai Nielsen, “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” *Philosophy* 42 (1967): 193: “The different modes of discourse which are distinctive forms of life have a logic of their own.”

²⁵ Nielsen, 205-206.

²⁶ Rabbi David Berger, “Revisiting ‘Confrontation’ After Forty Years: A Response to Rabbi Eugene Korn,” available at: http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/Berger_23Nov03.htm.

²⁷ Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 13. I fail to understand the concept of betrayal here. Indeed, it would seem that much of Greenberg’s theological work performs this “translation” function.

I fail to understand, however, why a faith experience cannot be dissected and discussed. Even if I experience God in a chariot trailing clouds of glory, why am I incapable of describing that experience, however inartfully? Nonetheless, Berger's point, even if true, is essentially irrelevant to our discussion of the possibility of dialogue. What we normally understand as theological dialogue is not the comparison of mutual personal faith experiences but rather the discussion of principles of faith. The delegitimation of substantive theological dialogue, as will be noted later, must be based on different grounds.

If perceptions of faith cannot be communicated between different communities of faith, are we to argue that a member of one faith community cannot lecture or write about his faith to a member of another faith community? Remember, Soloveitchik himself gave his famous lecture "The Lonely Man of Faith"²⁸ to a Catholic audience. Obviously he was concerned with communicating with his audience.

To carry the point further, if issues of faith are incommensurable, what do we say about the work of scholars like Harry Wolfson who wrote on the Church Fathers,²⁹ Travers Herford who wrote on the Pharisees as well as the Talmud,³⁰ or George Foot Moore who studied Judaism in the age of the mishnah?³¹

²⁸ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1965)

²⁹ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

³⁰ R. Travers Herford, *The Pharisees* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962) and *Talmud and Apocrypha and a Comparative Study of the Jewish Ethical Teaching in the Rabbinical and Non-Rabbinical Sources in the Early Centuries* (London: Soncino Press, 1933).

³¹ George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

As to Greenberg's suggestion of betrayal, restated by Shalom Carmy as the view that no "refined person would 'dialogue' explicitly with friends and acquaintances about his most intimate family relations,"³² I see this as an argument about propriety, not impossibility. I would suggest that the propriety would depend on the facts and circumstances of the individual case.

B. The Relationship Between the "Community of the Many" and the "Community of the Few."

In large measure, I suspect Soloveitchik's concern was that any dialogue between the majority religion (Christianity) and the minority religion (Judaism) would not be a dialogue between equal subjects, but between a majority lording it over a minority. He appears to believe that in any dialogue with Christians, Jews as a minority religion will not receive what they expect from others, "recognition not as objects, but precisely as subjects of faith."³³ He seems to suggest that such encounters can only come out badly for Jews.

Thus, we can best comprehend Soloveitchik's understanding of interfaith dialogue as a claim regarding disputations – that is to say a dispute between two sides with a winner and a loser. The long and lachrymose history of such dialogue between Jews and Christians³⁴ would

³² Shalom Carmy, "'Orthodoxy is Reticence' – Taking Theology Seriously," http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_carmy.htm.

³³ Leon Klenicki, "The Jewish Religious Traditions" in George F. McLean & John P. Hogan eds., *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate in the 21st Century* 35, 37 (Washington, D.C.: John Paul II Cultural Center, Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005): 37.

³⁴ See for example Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism On Trial: Jewish Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (Rutherford, NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982) which describes disputations in Paris in 1240, Barcelona in 1263, and Tortosa in 1413-14, on pp. 19, 39 and 82 respectively. The Barcelona disputation included Nachmanides. See

certainly support this view. As Irving Greenberg suggests, in Soloveitchik's understanding, the result would be "a distortion in which the views of the minority – that is, Jews – would be placed on a Procrustean bed and would be stretched and cut to the measure of the majority faith."³⁵

I do not understand contemporary efforts at interreligious dialogue in that sense. Interreligious dialogue is not a debate to determine whose view of God is correct or "better." Rather, it is an effort at understanding – understanding the "other" religion and its theological basis. Such inter-convictional dialogue, I would argue, can lead to "fruitful engagement in the meeting of diverse religious communities."³⁶ But it is clear that "a prime element in fruitful encounter must be the location of actual belief differences."³⁷

For Jews this is especially important because it means providing an accurate description of the concepts of Judaism and where they differ from Christianity. This, I might add, will often require assisting Christians to understand that many of their historically enshrined stereotypes of Jewish law and theology do not reflect what Jews actually believe. Such dialogue is far from an attempt to reconcile differences.

The essential point of Korn's position regarding interfaith dialogue is the distinction between dialogue and disputation. He likes the former and will have nothing to do with the latter. That distinction, it seems to me, is really one of motive and nothing more. Certainly one can understand why Korn would argue that Jews should not enter into discussions about religion with persons seeking to convert them. At a minimum (in Soloveitchik's terms) such conduct shows a complete lack of "mutual respect." Nonetheless it is unclear

Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

³⁵ Greenberg, 13.

³⁶ James Van McClendon and James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 175.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

to me why the motive for making a statement has anything to do with the truth of that statement. If this point is correct then Korn's (and Soloveitchik's?) opposition to dialogue is a matter of taste, not a matter of analytic truth.

Now I have to be fair. I don't know if Christians want to enter the dialogue simply in an attempt to understand the other religion and its theological base. Perhaps they want to convince me or to convince themselves of the superiority of their faith system. So be it. Or to put it another way, why do I care? If I can learn something about the nature of the world or the nature of the human spiritual longing while they are trying to score points, it's their problem.

Now I would not have said that during the Middle Ages when Judaism was in an empirically inferior position to Christianity. Perhaps then I would have worried that my coreligionists (or even I, myself) would have lost heart in the interreligious dialogue and passed over to the other "team." But that was then and this is now.

C. An Assessment of the Inequality of the Relationship between Various Religions

My reading of "Confrontation" suggests that in Soloveitchik's view, the deep theological structure of Christianity is antagonistic to Judaism and Christianity would not be Christianity if it did not treat Jews as unequal. Although he does not use these terms, one can argue that Soloveitchik's approach to the status of the Catholic-Jewish relationship is essentialist and determinist. It is as if Soloveitchik understood the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in ontological terms, as a relationship in which the inequality is immutable, as though the negativity were rooted in necessary Christian doctrine. By this I mean that they reflect in some sense a moral anthropology – one

fixed and incapable of essential or transformative change.³⁸ And that being the case, Soloveitchik's stricture against interfaith dialogue is absolute and not contingent on either history or sociology.

One can well understand why Soloveitchik, steeped as he was in Jewish history and religious thought, would hold this view. Further, as Korn notes, Soloveitchik wrote in 1964, one year before Vatican II and the stream of theological re-evaluations undertaken by the Catholic Church.

Prior to this development, the Church was wedded to the teaching of contempt,³⁹ buttressed by a doctrine of supersession which stated that whatever value Judaism had ended with the coming of Christianity. That position is no more. Consider but one text, the 2002 Pontifical Biblical Commission document, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*.⁴⁰ It is official Church teaching with a preface by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, at the time head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now Pope Benedict XVI. That document states, "Without the Old Testament the New Testament would be an

incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither."⁴¹ And consider this statement: "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation."⁴² Following Romans 11:1,⁴³ the document elaborates and reaffirms that the Jewish people have an eternal, unbreakable covenant with God, as indeed do numerous Church documents published after Vatican II.

Faced with this evidence of recent history, one can take either of two approaches.

One can remain skeptical of Catholic intentions and argue that one should not really believe that this doctrinal transformation is sincere or will last. For such persons their required threshold of proof means that as a practical matter they will never accept the Church's bona fides in this area. There are adumbrations of this approach in the comments to Korn's paper by Erica Brown⁴⁴ and Aryeh Klapper.⁴⁵ I believe that (writing before Vatican II) Soloveitchik's opposition to

³⁸ See Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, "Tav Lemeitav Tan Du Mi-Lemeitav Armalu: An Analysis of the Presumption," *Edah* 4/1 (2004), available at http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/4_1_kaddari.pdf. It is interesting that Halperin-Kaddari associates such a view with the Rav in her analysis of the talmudic presumption of *Tav Lemeitav Tan Du Mi-Lemeitav Armalu* that a woman would rather be married to a bad husband than remain single, *Baba Qamma* 110b-111a. She reviews the various understandings of that concept. She notes that the Rav took a relatively "strict" view of *Tav Lemeitav*, appearing to base his analysis on an ontological understanding of the "essence" of the gender distinction which has, in his own words, "nothing to do with the social and political status of women in antiquity." The presumption, he suggests, is not based on psychology, but "is an existential fact." It may be that Soloveitchik approaches the relationship of the "community of the many" and the "community of the few" in a similarly determinist way.

³⁹ Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

⁴⁰ Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, Preface.

⁴² *Ibid.*, §21.

⁴³ "What I am saying is this: is it possible that God abandoned his people? Out of the question! I too am an Israelite, descended from Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." (New Jerusalem Bible)

⁴⁴ "Political correctness cannot be bought at the price of historical dignity. Rethinking the proselytization of Jews is still not enough to bring us to authentic dialogue about our belief systems." Erica Brown, "The Un-Response," http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_brown.htm.

⁴⁵ "What one pope has done, another can put asunder – I will never forget Hirsch Goodman, in the August 2001 issue of *Jerusalem Report*, explaining that the peace of Oslo had become entrenched in Palestinian hearts to the extent that it was irreversible. The Vatican's grudging and belated diplomatic acceptance of the Israeli state is to my mind far from an acknowledgment of the Jewish right to our homeland." Aryeh Klapper, "Revisiting 'Confrontation' After Forty Years – A Response to Rabbi Eugene Korn," http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/Klapper_23Nov03.htm.

interfaith dialogue drew on a suspicion “that a strong conversionist impulse lurked behind Christian dialogue efforts” and a fear “that a tidal wave of interfaith interest might sweep many Jews into the bosom of the church.”⁴⁶

The second approach, shared, I believe by both Eugene Korn⁴⁷ and David Berger⁴⁸ (but not made explicitly) is that

⁴⁶ Greenberg, 13.

⁴⁷ Eugene Korn (see note 5) points out:

The critical distinction between the respectful hearing of the religious voices of others and doctrinal disputation untangles the paradox of R. Soloveitchik's private conversation with Christian religious thinkers, whose insights he integrated into his religious *Weltanschauung*, and his rejection of formal interfaith dialogue on theological subjects. The former posed no threat to the validity of his faith, while he assumed that the latter was targeted at undermining Jewish faith commitment. To employ the favorite technique of R. Soloveitchik's Brisker tradition, there are two concepts of theological discourse: one is authentic dialogue, which is free religious expression that is governed by the legitimacy of difference and mutual respect; the other is polemical disputation, which is futile in its illogic and objectionable in its triumphalism.

⁴⁸ David Berger (see note 26) argues:

[A]s much as theological propositions can be conveyed, as much as even religious emotions can be partially expressed, that which ultimately commits a person to God or a faith community to its particular relationship with God remains essentially private, leaving not only a lonely man of faith but a lonely people of faith – a nation that dwells alone.

Since Rabbi Soloveitchik believed that untrammelled interfaith dialogue presumes to enter into that realm, he declares it out of bounds. Even though dialogue among believers concentrating on social issues has a religious dimension, it does not presume to enter that innermost realm, and its value therefore outweighs its dangers. If I am correct, then even theological discussion that knows its place would not be subject to the most radical critique in “Confrontation,” and in this general sense I am in agreement with Dr. Korn.

Berger continues:

But it is critically important to recognize that the incommunicability of the ultimate religious commitment is not the totality of Rabbi Soloveitchik's argument. The very fact that he goes beyond that point lends credence to the view that he did not mean it as an all-encompassing delegitimation of any theological discussion. If he did, there would have been little reason to go further. But he does go further, and here his argument moves from the extreme rhetoric of philosophical absolutism to the penetrating,

Soloveitchik's injunction against dialogue should be understood as a prudential point about the wisdom of dialogue rather than a normative argument asserting the impossibility of dialogue.

On this view one would recognize that the intellectual and sociological context has changed in fundamental ways in the forty years since “Confrontation” was written, and that these changes cannot help but have an effect on the force of Soloveitchik's conclusions. While I am certainly sympathetic to this approach as a way of salvaging Soloveitchik's views in the light of historical change, nowhere does Soloveitchik say some dialogue is acceptable by certain people under certain circumstances. While he does set down four conditions for interfaith dialogue,⁴⁹ a fair reading of the essay suggests that in Soloveitchik's view these conditions cannot ever be met.

pragmatic, prescient insights that make “Confrontation” an essay of ongoing relevance.

⁴⁹ I quote from “Confrontation”:

First, we must state, in unequivocal terms, the following. We are a totally independent faith community. We do not revolve as a satellite in any orbit. Nor are we related to any other faith community as “brethren” even though “separated.” . . . [p. 21].

Second, the *logos*, the word, in which the multifarious religious experience is expressed does not lend itself to standardization or universalization. . . . [I]t is important that the religious or theological *logos* should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities whose modes of expression are as unique as their apocalyptic experiences . . . [pp. 23-24].

Third, we members of the community of the few should always act with tact and understanding and refrain from suggesting to the community of the many, which is both proud and prudent, changes in ritual or emendations of its texts. . . . Interference with and non-involvement in something which is totally alien to us is a *conditio sine qua non* for the furtherance of good will and mutual respect [pp. 24-25].

Fourth, we certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions, to even hint to another faith community that we are mentally ready to revise historical attitudes, to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile “some” differences [p. 25].

See also Korn's discussion [see note 5] of these conditions.

D. The Danger of Syncretism

One of the fears Soloveitchik expressed was the danger of syncretism, that is, the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing religious principles, or practices, by incorporating elements of one religion into another. This concern has some basis in reality. Many of the less sophisticated proponents of interreligious dialogue point to the overlapping roots of Judaism and Christianity and move rapidly to the idea that common origins means a common belief. Many politicians refer blithely to the Judeo-Christian tradition to promote religious tolerance and the full integration of Jews into American society. This ecumenism can easily lead to a subjectivism by which all religions (or at least all Abrahamic religions) are seen as essentially equal – each being as good as the next. On this view, “all religions are diverse symbolic objectifications of the same basic spiritual experience and intimation of Ultimate Being.”⁵⁰

Alternatively the search for a common core can result in a dilution of one’s own distinct religious doctrine. I once learned political theory with the magisterial John Plamenetz, who notwithstanding his erudition managed somehow to make thinkers as disparate as Hegel, Rousseau and Kant come out as slightly eccentric English liberals. Something similar could result from untrammelled interreligious dialogue. And indeed if you read a book like *Faith Transformed: Christian Encounters with Jews and Judaism*⁵¹ it is obvious

⁵⁰ Tamar Ross, “Reflections on the Possibilities of Interfaith Communication in Our Day,” *Edah* 1/1 (2000):5 at <http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/ross.pdf>. She goes on to say, “[M]y exposure to any rival religion can teach me something about our common core, thus increasing the potential for correction and refinement of my own particular truth. In that event, interfaith encounters become mutually enriching and the existence of diverse religious expressions mandates cooperation and mutual respect” (p. 5).

⁵¹ John C. Merkle, ed., *Faith Transformed: Christian Encounters with Jews and Judaism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

that engaging Jewish theology has affected the theological thinking of many Christian scholars. But it need not be the case. It depends on the person and the character of the “dialogue.”

Orthodox Judaism recoils at either of these possibilities of syncretism and insists on the uniqueness of the Jewish religious “project” asserting that existentially the Jews are a “people who dwell alone.” This negative reaction to anything that smacks of common beliefs may be a key to understanding the Orthodox “mood” on dialogue.⁵²

E. How Do You Divide the Sacred from the Profane in Civic Life?

As is well known, while Soloveitchik proscribed what he calls theological dialogue, he did allow, and indeed encouraged, coalitions of interfaith groups to discuss and act on social welfare issues. Thus Soloveitchik has noted:

As a matter of fact our common interests lie not in the realm of faith, but in that of the secular orders. There, we all face a powerful antagonist, we all have to contend with a considerable number of matters of great concern. The relationship between two communities must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated. In these matters, religious communities may together recommend action to be

⁵² I recently saw a production of Hyam Maccoby’s “The Disputation.” While not vouching for its historical accuracy, no one watching Theodore Bikel’s presentation of Nachmanides would worry about disputations ineluctably leading to syncretism. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/29/AR2005092900586_3.html.

developed and may seize the initiative to be implemented later by general society.⁵³

Indeed, that has been the stated position of the modern orthodox community.⁵⁴

Given Soloveitchik's general proscription I find this "waiver" puzzling. Certainly, as a theoretical matter one cannot separate secular activity for the common good from its theological underpinnings. This is true of Judaism and from what I can see from teaching at the Catholic University of America for Roman Catholicism as well. The extraordinary emphasis on "*hesed*" at my law school (where law review editors sign up for their stint at homeless food preparation) stems from their understanding of Catholic mission.

Ironically, Soloveitchik recognized this. In a footnote in "Confrontation," he wrote, "The term 'secular orders' is used here in accordance with its popular semantics. For the man of faith, this term is a misnomer. God claims the whole, not a part of man, and whatever He established as an order within the scheme of creation is sacred."⁵⁵ This makes it difficult to work out the boundaries of common welfare activities from religious interaction.

⁵³ Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," p. 24.

⁵⁴ See Rabbinical Council of America, "Statement Adopted by the Rabbinical Council of America at the Mid-Winter Conference, February 3-5, 1964," *Tradition* 6/2 (1964): 28-29:

Any suggestion that the historical and meta-historical worth of a faith community be viewed against the backdrop of another faith, and the mere hint that a revision of basic historic attitudes is anticipated, are incongruous with the fundamentals of religious liberty and freedom of conscience and can only breed discord and suspicion. Such an approach is unacceptable to any self-respecting faith community that is proud of its past, vibrant and active in the present and determined to live on in the future and to continue serving God in its own individual way. Only full appreciation on the part of all of the singular role, inherent worth and basic prerogatives of each religious community will help promote the spirit of cooperation among faiths.

⁵⁵ Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," note 8.

As but one example, consider the State of Israel, a topic for which the Jewish community may well most desire wider public political support. Putting secular Zionism aside, it is passing certain that Zionism from an Orthodox perspective is based on theological tenets – as but one example, some affirm that the establishment of the State of Israel is the beginning of the "dawn of our redemption."⁵⁶ Indeed, Soloveitchik himself has argued for the religious, that is to say halakhic (if not messianic) status of the Jewish state in *Kol Dodi Dofek*.⁵⁷ Conversely, while sympathy for Israel after World War II was clearly based on Christian sympathy (if not guilt) after the Holocaust, doctrinal acceptance by Christians, whether Catholic or Evangelical, turns on their understandings (albeit differing) of Christian theology. How can one create a religious coalition on behalf of Israel while ignoring religious doctrine? The same is true, if not less obvious, with religious coalitions for social justice, protection of the environment or other aspects of *tikkun olam*.

F. Soloveitchik and the "Soloveitchik Line"

In trying to understand the varieties of meanings drawn from the text in "Confrontation" regarding interreligious dialogue, one is reminded of Karl Marx's adage, "All I know is that I am not a Marxist."⁵⁸ The fact is that while numerous scholars claim to follow Soloveitchik's teaching, they

⁵⁶ The Hebrew is *Reishit Tzmitat Ge'ulatinu*, which translates more accurately as the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. The term comes from a prayer for the state of Israel drafted by Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog in 1948. The phrase is considered central to our understanding of religious Zionism, which views the creation of the state of Israel in eschatological terms.

⁵⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen - My Beloved Knocks* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2006)

⁵⁸ "Letter from Friedrich Engels to Conrad Schmidt" (Aug. 5, 1890), in Dona Torr, ed., *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Correspondence 1846-1895* (London: M. Lawrence, 1934), 472.

interpret the meaning of his proscription against interreligious dialogue in radically different and at times contradictory ways.⁵⁹

Marc B. Shapiro, citing David Hartman, suggests that the proscription is against “some sort of organized, presumably official, meeting,” between members of each religion.⁶⁰ The concept calls to mind the medieval disputation and the sad history of Jewish-Catholic relations to which they testify.⁶¹

But those disputations were not necessarily “official” in the sense that the debaters were authorized to represent their faiths. Indeed, while the Church has official theologians, it is not clear that Judaism has any such “office” within its hierarchy.

In marked contrast David Berger suggests that “[i]t is... friendly theological discussion and not religious disputation”⁶² that is forbidden because such “friendly” discussion would, as Soloveitchik says, create pressures “to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and

to reconcile ‘some’ differences.”⁶³ I suppose there is a legitimate fear that propensity and intellectual intimacy (that is to say “friendly” discussion) will lead to a “rounding of the edges” that distinguish Judaism from the “other.”⁶⁴ This is the danger of syncretism that I discussed above.

Others have suggested that Soloveitchik used the term “religious dialogue” to include not only “discussing with priests the Gospels – their theology, but also... discussing the Torah – which is our theology” including discussions of *Torah-u-Maadah*⁶⁵ (the combinations and intersections of Jewish and secular studies).

Further, Jeremy Wieder analyzes “interfaith dialogue” as referring to two faiths trying to engage in reconciliation. As he suggests,

This, by definition, requires each side, as the Rav formulates it, “to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith.” When the Rav speaks of “religious dialogue” (as opposed to “social dialogue”) he refers not to information sessions about faith matters, but to dialogue, a conversation which presumes genuine “give and take” between the participants. If a Jew were to give a lecture about some aspect of Jewish faith or halakha to a non-Jew, even if the non-Jew were to ask questions (thereby engaging in “dialogue” in the common use of the term), he

⁵⁹ In that regard we should remember the cautionary note of Marvin Fox, that “there are writers who claim to know the Rav’s unexpressed inner thoughts, his unspoken aims and purposes, his conscious and unconscious motivations, and who offer accounts of his thought based on this supposed secret knowledge. There is in this style of interpretation a level of presumptuousness which is not only tasteless, but also profoundly and inexcusably misleading.” Marvin Fox, “The Unity and Structure of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Thought,” *Tradition* 24:2 (1989): 45-46.

⁶⁰ Marc B. Shapiro, “‘Confrontation’: A Mixed Legacy,” n.1, http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/Sol_shapiro.htm. Hartman speaks of an “official political meeting of ‘representatives’ and ‘spokesmen’” as opposed to “students who are studying together in university or theological colleges, or people wanting to study Talmud or New Testament thought or Thomas Aquinas or Maimonides together” [Hartman, *Love and Terror*, 157-58].

⁶¹ See note 34. Also Hershel Reichman, “The Cardinals’ Visit: Thoughts of a Rosh Yeshiva,” *The Commentator* (Yeshiva Univ.), Feb. 17, 2004: <http://www.yucommentator.com/media/paper652/news/2004/02/17/Editorials/opEd/The-Cardinals.Visit.Thoughts.Of.A.Rosh.Yeshiva-607709.shtml>

⁶² See note 26.

⁶³ Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” p. 25.

⁶⁴ Some, like David Berger, have criticized reciprocity: See David Berger, “Statement Regarding the New York Times Ad by Dabru Emet,” (Sept. 14, 2000): <http://www.ou.org/public/statements/2000/betty25.htm>. See also “*Dabru Emet*: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity” at: <http://www.icjs.org/what/njsp/dabruemet.html>.

⁶⁵ One might consider the marked contrast in Heschel’s position in Reuven Kimmelman, “Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish-Christian Relations,” *Edah* 4/2 (2004):1-21 at http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/4_2_Kimelman.pdf.

would not be engaging in interfaith dialogue but in interfaith monologue.⁶⁶

Thus, describing an officially denominated “open dialogue” between Chief Rabbis and Cardinals brought together by the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish participants explained their participation by stating that “because there were no exchanges of views beyond the prepared papers, it did not formally qualify as theological dialogue.”⁶⁷ Consider what is being suggested. Give and take is dialogue and therefore forbidden; separate lectures are not. And if the audience asks questions? If the lectures are on point-counterpoint topics? These distinctions are so formal as to be ultimately differences without a distinction.

To further muddy the waters, David Hartman suggests that Soloveitchik’s fear is not the fact of interfaith dialogue but the concern that the wrong type of person will undertake it.⁶⁸ Hartman reads Soloveitchik as intending “Confrontation” as “a political responsum that addresses the issue of public and politically charged discussions between Judaism and Christianity as institutions. It is a response to the way Jews are to survive in an open society that offers both intellectual riches and the frightful reality of assimilation.”⁶⁹ As many have pointed out, Soloveitchik’s work is replete with references to Christian theologians. What Soloveitchik fears, Hartman suggests, is the “westernized Jew” who “may well

acquiesce in the subjugation of Judaism to universal categories that will eliminate its numinous faith element.”⁷⁰

This view is reinforced by Walter Wurzberger who argues the prudential position that “only properly qualified *specialists* should devote themselves to the study in depth of non-Jewish theologies.”⁷¹ Wurzberger (and I believe, Soloveitchik) considers that dialogue is a dialectical process in the sense that “various particular formulations of religious truth are but inadequate attempts to appropriate a higher but rather elusive religious truth.”⁷² Soloveitchik rejects this view as indeed he should. But analytically at least, Wurzberger had it wrong. If it is true that the study of other theologies (and in particular theologies that have arisen against the context of Judaism) can teach us something about our own faith, it need not be because we are “modif[ing] or correct[ing] [religious faith] in the light of another system.”⁷³ The desire to understand the other is not an effort to extract “an essence of religion ... from a variety of religious affirmations.”⁷⁴ This I believe is one of the root weaknesses of Soloveitchik’s approach.

In fairness, I should note that Lawrence Kaplan urges a more nuanced view of this distinction. He points out that Soloveitchik “is careful never to speak of ‘the secular orders’ or ‘the secular sphere.’ He speaks of ‘the public world of

⁶⁶ Jeremy Wieder, “The Cardinals’ Visit: Differing Thoughts of Another Rosh Yeshiva,” *The Commentator* (Yeshiva Univ.), Mar. 18, 2004: <http://www.yucommentator.com/media/paper652/news/2004/03/18/Editorials/opEd/The-Cardinals.Visit.Differing.Thoughts.Of.Another.Rosh.Yeshiva-633447.shtml>.

⁶⁷ Nacha Cattan, “Cardinals Meet for a Dialogue with Top Rabbis” *Forward* (Jan. 23, 2004).

⁶⁸ I owe this interpretation of “Hartman on Soloveitchik” to Daniel Rynhold, “The Philosophical Foundations of Soloveitchik’s Critique of Interfaith Dialogue,” *Harvard Theological Review* 96/1 (2003): 101-106.

⁶⁹ Hartman, *Love and Terror*, 156-57.

⁷⁰ Rynhold: 106.

⁷¹ Walter S. Wurzberger, “Justification and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue,” in Walter S. Wurzberger & Eugene B. Borowitz, *Judaism and the Interfaith Movement* (New York: Synagogue Council of America, 1967), 12. David Rosen tells us that the late Pinchas Peli cites to a specific conversation he had with Soloveitchik affirming this view, David Rosen, “Orthodox Judaism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” at http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_rosen.htm.

⁷² Wurzberger, 13.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

humanitarian and cultural endeavors,' of 'areas of universal concern,' or 'socio-cultural and moral problems.'⁷⁵

Kaplan suggests that for

the line between permissible and impermissible interfaith dialogue is not between interfaith dialogue in "the realm of faith" and interfaith dialogue in the "secular sphere." It is between two types of *religious* interfaith dialogue. The Rav, that is, was opposed to interfaith religious *theological* dialogue 'concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic, or ritual aspects of faith,' for those aspects represent the individual, unique, and private side of religion, but he supported interfaith religious humanitarian dialogue concerning socio-cultural and moral issues, for such dialogue was grounded in religious categories and values that represent the universal and public side of religion.⁷⁶

The distinction Kaplan suggests is more fully developed in a document styled "On Interfaith Relationships" that Soloveitchik drafted some years after "Confrontation" to guide the *practice* of rabbis belonging to the Rabbinical Council of America.⁷⁷ There Soloveitchik states:

We are ... opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic, or ritual aspects of our faith vis-à-vis 'similar' aspects of another faith community. ... When however, we move from the private world of faith to the public world of humanitarianism and cultural endeavors, *communication among the various faith communities is desirable and even essential*. We are ready to enter into dialogue on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, Man's Moral Values... Civil Rights, etc., which revolve about the

⁷⁵ Lawrence Kaplan, "Revisionism and the Rav: The Struggle for the Soul of Modern Orthodoxy," *Judaism* 48/3 (Summer 1999): 305.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

religious spiritual aspects of our civilization. *Discussion within these areas will, of course, be within the framework of our religious outlooks and terminology.*⁷⁸

G. The Anti-Dialogue "Mood"

The wide variety of "understandings" of Soloveitchik's text suggests that whatever its original meaning, it has come to mean something "more" on the Orthodox street. The ban on dialogue has been extended way beyond intellectual discussion to include, if not a ban on contact, then anything that might be viewed as recognition. This is clear from the remarkable controversy over the visit of a delegation of cardinals to the Yeshiva University Beis Midrash (study hall) in January 2004.⁷⁹ The cardinals did not come to debate or even to lecture, they came to watch. Even so, the backlash among the Yeshiva world was extreme with many commentators referring to a violation of Soloveitchik's ruling.⁸⁰ And when the cardinals visited again in March 2005, a student protest petition led the Yeshiva administration to request that they come without their vestments⁸¹ and not enter the study hall.⁸²

⁷⁸ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "On Interfaith Relationships," *Rabbinical Rec.* (February 1966), also available at "Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 'Confrontation'" in Norman Lamm and Walter S. Wurzbarger eds., *A Treasury of "Tradition"* (New York: Hebrew Pub. Co., 1967), 78-80. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ A sparse account can be found in Daniel J. Wakin and Laurie Goodstein, "In Upper Manhattan, Talmudic Scholars Look Up and Find Cardinals Among the Rabbis," *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2004: B5.

⁸⁰ Reichman; Ari Fridman, "Cardinals Visit Again Amid Student Pressure Against," *The Commentator* (Yeshiva Univ.), Mar. 8, 2005: http://www.yucommentator.com/media/paper652/news/2005/03/08/News/Cardinals_Visit_Again_Amid_Student_Pressure_Against-883249.shtml?page=1.

⁸¹ I do not speak to the halakhic question here but relay an anecdote told me by George Weigel, the author of a magisterial biography of John Paul II. Weigel relates that when John Paul was planning his history

In a 1951 Supreme Court case analyzing the level of deference courts should afford administrative agency decisions, Justice Frankfurter famously tells us that Congress did not articulate a specific level of deference, but instead set a “mood.”⁸³ In reviewing the wide (and often contradictory) range of understandings of “Confrontation,” the only way we can reasonably interpret the “Soloveitchik Doctrine” is that it reflects a “mood” (or *hashkafa*) rather than an analytic parsing of the concept. Doing so may provide a useful way of approaching the text. For one, it explains the views of those commentators who have stressed Soloveitchik’s context-oriented methodology. Further, it focuses the discussion on what is happening in the orthodox world today. Finally, it resolves the question of whether Korn’s vision has moved considerably from the concerns and

insights of the essay.⁸⁴ While one can make an argument either way, if one accepts my view that the essay articulates a “mood” or skeptical approach to relations with Christianity, the question is a non-issue.

2. Interreligious Dialogue & Christianity

A. Why are Orthodox Jews so Cautious About Interaction with Christianity?

It is difficult to understand the refusal to engage in dialogue with Christianity, be it formal or informal, as reflecting anything other than a deep insecurity of Judaism in the theological arena.⁸⁵ One senses that behind all this animosity to talking with Christians is some kind of psychological need – a desire to show that as a people we don’t need them anymore. This view is reinforced by Erica Brown’s suggestion that it is a denial of what she calls “historical dignity” to talk with them.⁸⁶ As Reichman pointed out, “Millions of Jewish martyrs demand no less of us.”⁸⁷

I can certainly understand this attitude which is validating both to those who decry dialogue and to the Jewish people,

making visit to Rome’s main synagogue, some congregants requested (or demanded) that he should not come with his Papal vestments. When the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, raised this, the Pope responded that if he were visiting as a private citizen then such a stricture could be easily followed. However, the entire point of the exercise was for him to visit as the head of the Roman Catholic Church and, as such, he was required to wear his vestments. The point is worth pondering.

⁸² Fridman. One student suggested that the presence of the Cardinals in the Beis Midrash would be “emotionally distressing.” More resources can be found in a former Yeshiva University student’s blog, at <http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2004/03/cardinals-in-beis-midrash-rundown-of.html>.

⁸³ *Universal Camera v. N.L.R.B.*, 340 U.S. 474, 487 (1951) (Frankfurter, J.):
It is fair to say that in all this Congress expressed a mood. And it expressed its mood not merely by oratory but by legislation. As legislation that mood must be respected, even though it can only serve as a standard for judgment and not as a body of rigid rules assuring sameness of application. Enforcement of such broad standards implies subtlety of mind and solidity of judgment. But it is not for us to question that Congress may assume such qualities in the federal judiciary.

⁸⁴ See Edward Breuer’s comment: “I do not think that Dr. Korn’s desire to affirm the desirability and importance of interfaith dialogue can be fairly rooted in Rav Soloveitchik’s essay” [“Revisiting ‘Confrontation’ After Forty Years: Some Comments,” at http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_breuer.htm].

⁸⁵ I suppose it could also include a judgment by Jews that Christians do not deserve to have Jews speak openly with them about Judaism. This may be because of past Christian sins against Judaism and that it is not appropriate or some would say “dignified” for Rabbis to talk with Church officials (see following note). One commentator has suggested that a meeting between clerics and Rabbis (let alone dialogue) is inferentially forgiving the Church for past sins and goes so far as to ask “whether we Jews today have the moral license to forgive the Church for sins committed against the Jews in the past” [Reichman, see note 61].

⁸⁶ Brown, “The Un-Response,” see note 44.

⁸⁷ Reichman, see note 61.

but it is hardly a normative rule. And indeed, from a prudential perspective we should remember that even if it is validating, it is validating only to ourselves. The fact that we will not talk to Christians certainly does not make them feel that they have been put in their place. To the extent that Christians feel an obligation to Jews because of the historical record, it is hard to believe that that sense of Christian “guilt” is in any way increased because of the Jewish refusal to engage in dialogue.

Some have further argued that even if the changes that have occurred since World War II in Christian thought and practice deserve full credit, the “conditions making for present amity may not persist.”⁸⁸ Indeed, some have suggested that it will take a number of generations before Jews can trust this Christian volte-face and respond positively.⁸⁹ While I agree with Shalom Carmy that “[t]he 20th century ... has been exceptionally hard on prophets of inevitable progress in human relations[.]”⁹⁰ that is at best an argument to prudence in dialogue but not an absolute ban.

I suppose one could argue that it is possible to learn what is valuable about the “other” without talking to them. Presumably one can read books or listen to tapes. But surely if you have overcome the general objection that one should spend one’s spare time learning Torah rather than learning about the other then limiting personal contact seems an artificial constraint.

At a popular level the ignorance of Christianity in Israeli circles is breathtaking, as is the lack of engagement at any level, be it cultural, political, let alone theological. While it is likely true that Israeli Jews do not have historical insecurity in dealing with the Church, they often show an equally unfortunate lack of respect for other religious traditions.

⁸⁸ Carmy, see note 32.

⁸⁹ Ibid. See also Klapper, (note 45).

⁹⁰ Carmy.

B. The Role of Christianity in Judaism

One thing is clear. While Christianity has recognized Judaism as a source of Christian self-understanding, no such correlative urge is felt in Jewish circles. More and more, Christian seminaries offer courses in Judaism. I know of no similar courses in Christianity or the early Church at Jewish Theological Seminary or Yeshiva University. At a recent gathering at the Catholic University of America, an eminent Cardinal spoke with pride of his *havruta* (learning partnership) in Talmud study and urged joint Talmud study by Christian and Jewish scholars to better understand the life of Jesus. Very few Jewish scholars seek similar joint study of the Gospels to better elucidate the world of the early rabbis.

This negativity towards Christianity exists across the board not only in the yeshiva world, but in a more nuanced manner, in modern orthodoxy as well. Deborah Weissman suggests the situation is different in Israel.⁹¹ I am surprised to learn it. At best, Israelis remain ignorant of any but the most extreme caricatures of Christianity. Uri Bialer reports that “the current curriculum of the state education system refers to Jesus at best once and then only cursorily. The state religious education system makes no mention whatsoever.”⁹²

Too often the treatment of Christians in Israel approaches, at times, “the practice of contempt.” Recent articles tell of religious Jews spitting on an Armenian Archbishop and a crucifix during a religious procession and

⁹¹ Deborah Weissman, “The Perspective of an Israeli Educator,” at: http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_weissman.htm.

⁹² Uri Bialer, *Cross on the Star of David, The Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948-1967* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2005), ix.

numerous verbal and physical assaults on Christian clergy.⁹³ In 1995 a religious soldier sprayed gunfire at a church in Haifa, claiming, according to the Jerusalem Post, that “it was a shame that he had to explain in court his motive for the shooting, which he said was self explanatory and written in Torah. His motive, he said, was to destroy all idols....”⁹⁴ While this attitude reflects a significant issue in Jewish sociology (and thought) regarding the status of the non-Jew, the insularity it reflects is heightened by the refusal to dialogue. While, as seen below, there may be some flexibility at the level of institutional leadership, other than David Rosen there are precious few orthodox rabbis in Israel or America who engage in interfaith anything, let alone dialogue with Christianity and I won’t even speak of Islam.⁹⁵

C. The Chief Rabbis’ Initiatives

In recent years the Vatican has entered into official dialogue with a group of Israeli rabbis organized by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (both Ashkenazi and Sephardic). This

⁹³ Steven Erlanger, “Spitting Incident Fuels Debate on Intolerance – Jerusalem Examines its Religious Divide,” *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 19, 2004: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2004/10/18/news/journal.php>; also his, “Many Faiths but Little Tolerance in Jerusalem,” *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 20, 2004: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2004/10/19/news/journal.php>; Abigail Radoszkowicz, “Interfaith Leaders Issue Plea for Mutual Respect,” *Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 27, 2004, in News; Amiram Barkat, “Christians in Jerusalem Want Jews to Stop Spitting on Them,” *Haaretz*, Dec. 10, 2004: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=487412>; These articles describe this and similar incidents. See also, the editorial, “Jerusalem’s Disgrace,” *Haaretz*, Dec. 10, 2004: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=487472&contrassID=1>.

⁹⁴ I owe this reference to David Berger. The article is “Soldier Who Shot up Church Sent for Psychiatric Evaluation: Suspect Says He Was Destroying Idols,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 28, 1995: 12.

⁹⁵ The remarkable Mordecai Froman, the Rav of Tekoa in Judea, is a notable exception.

dialogue has been undertaken by the “Joint Commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel’s Delegation for Relations with the Catholic Church and the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.” There have been five meetings, two in Jerusalem and three in Rome which have included visits to the Vatican and audiences with the Pope.⁹⁶ A wide variety of issues were on the table for discussion. These have included subjects including The Sanctity of Human Life and Family Values; The Relevance of Central Religious Teachings in the Holy Scriptures We Share, for Contemporary and Future Society; A Shared Vision of Social Justice and Ethical Conduct; and Respect for Human Life. The sacred character of the Holy Places in Jerusalem was also discussed.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ A preliminary meeting took place on June 5, 2002, for which no official statement was made. The texts of four joint statements that have been issued from subsequent meetings can be found at the Vatican’s website at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/sub-index/index_relations-jews.htm.

In addition to the above, Pope Benedict XVI published on October 26, 2005 a letter commemorating *Nostra Aetate*: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20051026_nostra-aetate_en.html. See too David Rosen, “*Nostra Aetate*, Forty Years After Vatican II: Present and Future Perspectives:” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20051027_rabbi-rosen_en.html.

⁹⁷ See “Statement to the Press from the Meeting of the Bilateral Committee of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, Oct. 17-19 2004”: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20041019_rabbinate-israel_en.html :

Jerusalem has a sacred character for all the children of Abraham. We call on all relevant authorities to respect this character and to prevent actions which offend the sensibilities of religious communities that reside in Jerusalem and hold her dear. We call on religious authorities to protest publicly when actions of disrespect towards religious persons, symbols and Holy Sites are committed, such as the desecration of cemeteries and the recent assault on the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem. We call on them to educate their communities to behave with respect and dignity towards people and towards their attachment to their faith.

While it has been suggested that the agenda items have been carefully worded to escape the strictures of Soloveitchik's position, any suggestion that the agenda items are not impregnated with theological considerations is, at best, caviling. The documents are drenched with a religious anthropology and if anything make short shrift of the view that the faith community can talk about family values or social justice without God.

The Israeli Chief Rabbinate, of course, unlike American modern orthodoxy, has never viewed itself as "under" Rabbi Soloveitchik's legal authority. Furthermore, to my knowledge, the Chief Rabbinate has never provided a halakhic analysis of the rationale for these meetings. Perhaps they viewed them as self-evident! Nonetheless, this deepening engagement and its obviously theological character significantly undercuts the practical force of the so-called Soloveitchik prohibition.

The reasons for the willingness or the apparent willingness of the Israeli rabbinate to "engage" the Vatican may be in part political – in some sense they represent the State of Israel. It may, of course, reflect a different halakhic reading of the sources, a point well worth further analysis. However, their position reflects to some extent a Jewish self-confidence that comes from Jewish sovereignty. The Israeli rabbinate, whatever their halakhic views regarding interaction with non-Jews, finds it hard to accept Soloveitchik's overriding fear that the "community of the many" will necessarily manipulate and control the "community of the few." Dr. Deborah Weissman suggests that the insecurity this refusal reflects does not really exist in Israeli Orthodox circles.⁹⁸ Figures like Chief Rabbi She'ar Yashuv Cohen of Haifa, head of the Chief Rabbinate's Committee on Relations with the Vatican, have felt it easier to engage in interreligious dialogue than their American Orthodox colleagues. Following a meeting with the Latin,

⁹⁸ See note 91.

Greek, and Armenian patriarchs, She'ar Yashuv Cohen noted, "Both sides understand that there is to be no attempt to change the other's opinions. Ever since the Pope's recent ruling against missionizing Jews, this has become much easier."⁹⁹ This is understandable. Zionist ideology tells us that the creation of a Jewish state will eliminate the unequal relationships with other nations and religions. And Israeli Jews do not experience any such inequality in their daily life. Thus for Israelis the grounds for Soloveitchik's fear of religious dialogue no longer exist. And indeed because of this majority status, even though there is significant negativity to Christianity in Israeli culture, the political and rabbinic leadership may well feel freer to interact with Christian clerics, if only, for "reasons of state."

3. Where Do We Go From Here?

It should be obvious that the Orthodox Jewish community's response to "Confrontation" has been more sociological than theological or philosophical. The essay has been interpreted by the Orthodox rabbinate to apply to a far greater range of activities than Soloveitchik actually discussed in his essay and is used to validate a general attitudinal approach by Orthodox Judaism – one that is broadly antagonistic to a wide range of interactions with the Catholic Church. The ways in which "Confrontation" has played out in the Orthodox world reflects the sociological and psychological needs of a community both traumatized by the Holocaust and increasingly self-assertive (if not triumphalist) with the rise of the State of Israel and the uniquely successful integration of Jews into American political life.

Some kinds of activities have been approved – largely social and political issues in which the Jewish community had a deep concern. But when the Jewish community was

⁹⁹ "Rabbi & MKs Upgrade Israel-Christian Relations," *Arutz Sheva*, Jan. 24, 2005: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=75808>.

interested in such joint action, it made no difference that the basis for the social and political coalition was in its underlying nature theological.

This attitude is reflected in the almost extreme skepticism regarding Catholic-Jewish relations of many of the Orthodox commentators to Korn's essay.¹⁰⁰ The comments are permeated with a sense that the Church can turn on a dime and revert to its outdated supersessionist theology. There is also a frankly surreal approach to the place of Jews in the modern world. It is as if we are the center of the universe and make judgments as independent actors without reference to the view of others. While that happy state may come to pass at the end of days, until then we remain "in" history, not outside it, and must accommodate to it or suffer the consequences.

It is unfortunate that those who would forbid full engagement with other faith-based communities neglect the costs of such parochialism. To the extent to which dialogue helps us to better understand the belief system of the "other," we come to better understand ourselves. Indeed, it is, I think, a truism that every social and intellectual movement develops, at least in part, because of some human or social need. Many scholars have suggested "that the Nazis did draw their popular support from people who felt morally outraged by the social order around them."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Carmy (note 32); Klapper (note 45); Brown (note 86).

¹⁰¹ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978), 417. The social composition of National Socialist membership was drawn disproportionately from "the rural farmers and small-town middle classes" [Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 58]. A more nuanced view of "the attraction of the successful fascist movements for millions of peasants and workers" can be found in Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45. See also Alan S. Milward, "Fascism and the Economy," in Walter Laqueur ed., *Fascism – A Reader's Guide* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), 385: "[T]he propensity to join

Methodism responded to a need of the English peasants to find a place in a rapidly industrializing society.¹⁰² And Sabbatarianism in the 17th century can be understood as a response to the political instability and social revolt reflected in what many historians have termed the general "crisis of the seventeenth century."¹⁰³ So by understanding the belief system of the other we understand better the variety of ways in which human beings respond to the social and psychological forces that beset them. In so doing, we tease out yet another thread of the tapestry of mankind, and we learn more about the manifold creatures of God.

The value of interfaith dialogue is not simply that it assists our understanding of the human tapestry. It has practical benefits to the Jewish people as well. If we accept that Christians are attempting to revise their historically pejorative theological understanding of Judaism, why should

a fascist part was determined more by psychological considerations than by social class".

¹⁰² Elie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), 64-65. See also Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History 30-50* (Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984). For a sociological analysis of the emergence of Methodism, see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 350-400.

¹⁰³ The term comes from E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," in Trevor Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 5-58. See Stephen Sharot, *Messianism, Mysticism, and Magic: A Sociological Analysis of Jewish Religious Movements* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), 110. We should note that the great historian of the Sabbatean movement, Gershom Scholem, rejects this analysis of Sabbatarianism as "simplistic[.]" see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press 1973), 1. But more recent scholarship considers Scholem's view that the Lurianic Kabbalah was "the central factor in the use of Sabbatarianism" as a flawed analysis suggesting "that the Sabbatean movement was a result of the forces of change that already existed in the Jewish community, rather than its cause." See Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 168-69.

we not assist them by providing accurate understandings of Jewish theological doctrine? Whatever else it may prove to be, proactive interfaith dialogue today is not the zero-sum game of a disputation or a covert effort at conversion but a chance for Jews to eliminate stereotypes and dispel misperceptions by presenting an accurate view of Jewish belief.

Furthermore, the reality is that we face the possibility of a war of civilizations between the West and Islam (indeed, some believe that war is at hand). Unless we are of the despairing view that religion can only be a source of human fratricide (think Thirty Years' War), we should be searching for every possible modality by which religion can serve a transformative role – and serve as a source for peace between nations and, indeed, civilizations. While one might respond that coalitions oriented toward the delivery of social services satisfy that need and are sufficient unto the day, relationships based on calculated self-interest are far different than relationships based on authentic engagement.

We are engaged, as well, in a cultural war in our own country. While it may be an exaggeration to say that “the barbarians are at the gates,” there can be little doubt that many persons of faith have more in common with each other in America than with secular society. Abraham Heschel understood this well:

[T]here is another ecumenical movement, worldwide in extent and influence: nihilism. We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one

another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?¹⁰⁴

Most adherents of the “Soloveitchik doctrine” allow interfaith coalitions under narrow restrictions: they must deal only with politics or the delivery of social services. In my view this kind of narrow interaction, however, fails to capture the human and spiritual synergies that could come from the full and vibrant interaction of all those who claim themselves as “children of Abraham.”

¹⁰⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Religion is an Island,” *Union Seminary Q. Rev.* 21/2/1 (January 1966): 119.