



Judaism and Christianity both claim to be true!

“But they have rival versions of the truth”

The Jerusalem Post editorial on January 7 spoke of the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” That fabled tradition does not exist, nor does the “Judeo-Christian ethic.” Though sharing a common origin in the Hebrew Scriptures, the two faiths read the scriptural texts differently. They believe in God, but view Him through different lenses. They each have a story, but they are not the same. They each have a concept of man, but they are not the same. They are both ethical religions, but with separate ideas of man’s nature, salvation and destiny.

For Christianity, Jesus is central; in Judaism he does not figure even though he was a Jew. Christianity, says Leo Baeck, prefers the “finished statement” of dogma: Judaism, the “unending process of thought.” Judaism and Christianity both claim to be true, but they have rival versions of the truth. There are commonalities, but so many differences.

Arthur A. Cohen argues in *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* that the Judeo-Christian ethic is a myth produced by “Christian guilt and Jewish neurasthenia,” to obscure the fact that Christians and Jews are “theological enemies... living in the same street as neighbours.” But is sharing the street what Cohen calls “reconciliation of contradiction, the dissolution of paradox,” or mere politeness, propriety and political correctness? Are we merely, in Cohen’s words, “inundated institutions making common cause before a world that regards them as hopelessly irrelevant and meaningless”?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik does not talk of enemies but strangers. Jew and Christian cannot always grasp what goes on in the other’s head. Martin Buber says the Jew thinks the “daring” Christian believes the unbelievable; the Christian says the “obdurate” Jew cannot see the truth. **Soloveitchik says all faiths are brothers in facing social problems, while theologically they are strangers: “The great encounter between God and man,” he says, “is a wholly personal affair incomprehensible to the outsider.”**

Leo Baeck says that all religions face similar questions, but phrase the questions, and answers, differently. Christianity is a “romantic” religion in a world of feelings where “rules are suspended.” Judaism is a “classical” religion which focuses on “reality with its commandment, and the profound seriousness of the tasks of our life.” Buber says Christianity freezes God in one position. Our task is not to diminish or damn the other, but to allow them to be themselves, so that “each of the partners, even when standing in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms and confirms the opponent as an existing other.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel says the issue is not what happens when I die, but what I do while I am alive. When asked, “What about the salvation of your soul?” he did not understand. For him the issue was not his soul, but his task: “What mitzvah can I do next?” We Jews have all been told, “You’ll end up in hell!” Our answer never varied: “We Jews have been to hell – on earth – and have come back. Our stress is this world: the next one is God’s concern.”

Claiming there was a Judeo-Christian tradition did not save religion or the world. The Holocaust brought civilization to its knees. Franz Grillparzer said, “Man moved from humanism to nationalism, from nationalism to barbarism.”

Man no longer had enough faith in God to overcome the forces of evil. The supposed believers rang the sanctuary bells in the interests of self-preservation, hoping to keep the fiends from shattering the church windows as they had done to the synagogues. They said the Jews deserved their punishment. Did anyone think that their Jesus was himself a Jew, and in destroying his people they were destroying their own Christianity? Could religion of a higher and nobler kind have saved the situation? It might at least have saved its own soul.

Today’s religion is fierce and fanatic, facing you down if you mildly beg to differ. It is aggressive, triumphant, bullying, bent on world domination. It’s not Christianity, which is in a post-Christian phase of disintegration. Nor is it Judaism: these days Judaism tends to look inward and rarely looks at global problems.

Christianity half-heartedly mounts its missions but does not expect much success. Judaism is suspicious of Christians after so much persecution and is often uncomfortable in the marketplace of ideas. Both faiths are ill at ease in relation to Islam, and Islam reciprocates: all three feel under siege.

In the West, formal adherence to religious institutions is declining. Few have genuine piety and spirituality, hearts and minds more than bells and smells. The brave people who try to combine piety and worldly engagement are too limited in scope, too lacking in spiritual muscle, too polite and genteel to make a difference. They have chats and drink tea together, but if religion hits the news it is neither sweet nor loving, but a strident voice with a contorted face. Religions do not speak reasonably but shout at each other.

Religions all claim to be owners of truth, but if each one has the truth, then none can give way. When former British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks said in his book, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, that there is truth in all religions, some rabbis accused him of heresy, insisting that it is Judaism which is truth. A new edition softened the language and spoke of wisdom in other religions. This reduced the heat, but it did not solve the problem. Either my religion is true or there is no reason to adhere to it.

If my truth is not consonant with yours, we have deadlock. If all religions are equally true, we are speaking illogicalities. If black is blue and blue is black, then color makes no sense. If apples are oranges and oranges are apples, then fruit needs to be redefined. There is a Jewish tradition and there is a Christian tradition. The question is not whether they can combine but whether they can work together.

The author is emeritus rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney.

Just a note!

I have had much input on this subject, especially from my dear friend, Dr. David Kiner who was the dean of our Bible college. He had met with **Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik** who confessed to him that he was a Born Again Christian!

Rabbi Soloveitchik has written a book on; “Repentance”¹ which took him more than 30 years to write on the subject. When in his frustration he realized there was something he was missing by faith!

At about that time a man named Shlomo² who was Prime Minister David Ben-Gurin’s³ body guard declared his belief openly that Jesus was the Messiah. Immediately Soloveitchik went to meet with him to understand why he believed and converted to Christianity.

After discussion for some time, in the middle of the night, **Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik** asked for a car to take him to the Jordan River. He received a wonderful revelation about Jesus from Shlomo and was baptized into Jesus for the remission of his sins and he came up out of the water speaking in other tongues as the Spirit of God gave utterance through him. What a wonderful true story. In this article, you can now understand the wisdom of **Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik** in his statements.

Dr. John M. Strome, Th.D.

Meet International Ministries.

¹ Soloveitchik On Repentance. ISBN: 0-8091-2604-4

² Shlomo (שְׁלֹמֹה), meaning peaceable, is a common Hebrew male given name.

³ David Ben-Gurin, Israeli politician, Zionist leader, prime minister of Israel David Ben-Gurin (16 October 1886 – 1 December 1973) was the primary founder of the State of Israel and the first Prime Minister of Israel.