

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

*Reflections on Conversion and Proselytizing
in Judaism and Christianity***David Berger**
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Setting aside disputes regarding the State of Israel, there is no more sensitive subject in the universe of Jewish-Christian relations than conversionary aspirations on the part of Christians. The reasons for this appear obvious—and in large measure they are—but they are also marked by layers of complexity that we would do well to examine, particularly in light of the controversy engendered by the revised Tridentine mass issued by Pope Benedict XVI and a full page advertisement in the *New York Times* in which prominent evangelical Christians advocated the targeted proselytizing of Jews.¹

Contemporary discussions of this issue usually take for granted that Judaism in principle eschews efforts to proselytize others. Thus, a *locus classicus* in the Talmud in effect instructs Jews approached by a gentile expressing an interest in conversion to suggest that the prospective convert urgently seek out a psychiatrist. Why, after all, would anyone in his or her right mind join a defeated and persecuted people? Only one who persists despite this effort at discouragement is eligible to pursue the goal of becoming a Jew.²

Nonetheless, some see this passage not as an expression of an anti-proselytizing principle but as the reaction of Jews who had lost the contest for pagan adherents and decided to make a virtue of their failure. The argument for the position that there were widespread Jewish efforts in the Graeco-Roman world to attract converts rests upon the presence of “God-fearing” semi-proselytes throughout that world as well as explicit or near-explicit assertions in several texts. In this forum, the most relevant of those texts is the assertion in Matthew (23:15) that Pharisees compass land and sea to make one proselyte. While the question of ancient Jewish proselytizing remains a lively matter of dispute, it is worth noting the obvious. Whether or not one endorses the plural form “Judaisms” in vogue among some historians, it is evident that ancient Jewish attitudes toward a host of religious questions ranged across a very large spectrum, so that indications of both proselytizing activity and opposition or indifference to such activity do not constitute a puzzling contradiction. Unless there are independent grounds to conclude that conflicting evidence about this issue testifies to historical development, such evidence can easily be read as a reflection of very different approaches to proselytizing that coexisted among Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman-rabbinic period.³

¹ *The New York Times*, March 28, 2008, p. A15. For my reaction to the new text of the mass, see “Let’s Clarify the Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 16, 2008.

² Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot* 47a.

³ For a book-length discussion of this issue arguing that Jews did not proselytize before the second century C.E., see Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1994).

As Judaism moved into the Middle Ages, it is evident that an explicit rabbinic text would carry more weight than evidence from Matthew or Graeco-Roman artifacts and literature. Jewish reluctance to proselytize was of course greatly reinforced by the attendant dangers of such efforts in both the Christian and the Muslim worlds. Setting aside the danger, the very fact that Jews were a small, relatively powerless minority rendered the idea that they could win over large numbers of converts unrealistic.

Beyond all this, there was, I think, a fascinating dialectic that played itself out in the Jewish psyche. To become a Jew is to join a people, not just a faith. The concept of Jewish chosenness, of the special sanctity of Israel as a collective, rendered the objective of a mass conversion to Judaism problematic. Even in the *eschaton*, all the nations may call upon God together in a clear voice (Zephaniah 3:9), but they remain discrete nations. In Jewish eyes, those nations would presumably follow the Noahide code, binding in historical times as well as at the end of days, which defines God's expectations of non-Jews in a manner that keeps them separate from Israel. Since obedience to this code provides eternal felicity to its non-Jewish adherents, the drive to convert gentiles to Judaism is diminished even further.

At the same time, it is far from clear that medieval Jews refrained from missionizing only or even primarily because they saw another route to salvation for gentiles. Given the realities of the medieval Jewish condition, many Jews so resented their persecutors that they had no interest in their salvation; rather, they looked forward to their damnation. While Hitler maintains so unique a position in the history of Judaeophobia that analogies can be dangerous and even offensive, it is nonetheless instructive to consider how Jews would have reacted in the last months of World War II to the prospect of a suddenly repentant Hitler who will enter the World to Come as a righteous man. Distasteful as this analogy is, it provides a graphic means of grasping the psychology of people who yearned for the moment when God would destroy their oppressors and consign them to damnation.⁴

Complicating the issue further is the relationship between Christianity and the requirements of the Noahide code. David Novak has written with considerable plausibility that a case can be made that Christianity is a quintessential fulfillment of that code since it not only establishes the obligatory moral framework but even meets the Maimonidean requirement that non-Jews observe the code out of belief that it is a product of divine revelation.⁵ Nonetheless, this position runs afoul of a theological point that was at the forefront of the medieval Jewish psyche, to wit, the status of worship directed at Jesus of Nazareth as a hypostasis of the triune God. Almost all medieval Jews saw this as a form of *avodah zarah*, or worship of an entity other than God, which prima facie violated one of the seven Noahide commandments. During the Paris Disputation of 1240, R. Yehiel of Paris displayed considerable unease when he was more or less forced to

⁴ Some forms of Christianity, at least today, take a position on forgiveness of enemies that can be quite jarring to Jews. During a break at an international meeting in Lower Manhattan between Catholic clergy, primarily cardinals, and Orthodox Jews arranged by the World Jewish Congress, the group walked to ground zero, where Cardinal Lustiger of France recited a spontaneous prayer. I was stunned when I heard the words, "Pardonnez les assassins." I cannot imagine a Jew who would share this sentiment, particularly in light of the fact that the 9/11 murderers left themselves no opportunity to repent. My discomfiture was enhanced later in the day when another cardinal spoke of how we can learn from a Jewish Holocaust survivor who converted to Catholicism and declared that she forgives those who tormented her in the camps.

⁵"Mitsvah," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael Signer (Boulder, Colorado, and Oxford, 2000), p. 118.

imply in response to a direct question that Christians could be saved through their own faith; other medieval Jews unhesitatingly answered this question in the negative.⁶

In sum, then, Jews in the Christian world refrained from missionizing as a result of an extraordinarily complex constellation of theological, historical, and psychological considerations not always consistent with one another: The Jewish people should retain its uniqueness even in eschatological times; non-Jews have an avenue of salvation without joining that people (though that avenue is probably not Christianity); missionizing was dangerous; its chances of meeting with significant success were minuscule; and the persecutors of Israel should receive their just punishment for all that they had done.

Despite all this, the impulse to have Christians recognize the truth was not absent from the medieval Jewish psyche. Members of a minority regularly mocked for their religious error and periodically pressured to renounce it enjoyed a sense of validation and enormous satisfaction when adherents of the majority faith recognized their own error. While this is a point whose psychological validity is almost self-evident, here is a text from the *Nizzahon Vetus*, a late-thirteenth-century Northern European polemic that I edited several decades ago, that spells it out:

With regard to their questioning us as to whether there are proselytes among us, they ask this question to their shame and to the shame of their faith. After all, one should not be surprised at the bad deeds of an evil Jew who becomes an apostate, because his motives are to enable himself to eat all that his heart desires, to give pleasure to his flesh with wine and fornication, to remove from himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven so that he should fear nothing, to free himself from all the commandments, cleave to sin, and concern himself with worldly pleasures. But the situation is different with regard to proselytes who converted to Judaism and thus went of their own free will from freedom to slavery, from light to darkness. If the proselyte is a man, then he knows that he must wound himself by removing his foreskin through circumcision, that he must exile himself from place to place, that he must deprive himself of worldly good and fear for his life from the external threat of being killed by the uncircumcised, and that he will lack many things that his heart desires; similarly, a woman proselyte also separates herself from all pleasures. And despite all this, they come to take refuge under the wing of the divine presence. It is evident that they would not do this unless they knew for certain that their faith is without foundation and that it is all a lie, vanity, and emptiness. Consequently, you should be ashamed when you mention the matter of proselytes.⁷

In this environment, a classic Talmudic commentary cites a medieval French proselyte's interpretation of a rabbinic text declaring converts to be as damaging to Israel as a serious disease. The reason for this, says the proselyte, is that converts observe the Torah with such care that they put born Jews to shame.⁸

⁶ See my discussion in "On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Ashkenazic Polemical Literature" (in Hebrew), in *Facing the Cross: The Persecutions of 1096 in History and Historiography*, ed. by Yom Tov Assis et al. (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 80-81.

⁷ *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1979; softcover edition, Northvale, New Jersey and London, 1996), #211, English section, pp. 206-207. I commented on this passage in "Jacob Katz on Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages," in *The Pride of Jacob: Essays on Jacob Katz and his Work*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), pp. 52-54.

⁸ *Tosafot to Qiddushin 70b, s.v. qashim gerim.*

It is a matter of no small interest that in addressing the question of the permissibility of teaching Torah to non-Jews, Maimonides took a stringent position with respect to Muslims – even though he saw them as exemplary monotheists – and a more lenient one with respect to Christians, even though he saw them as worshippers of *avodah zarah*. The reason he provides is that unlike Muslims, who consider the text of the Hebrew Bible unreliable, Christians accept the accuracy of that text and are therefore more susceptible to being persuaded of the true faith if they can be made to understand the correct meaning of the Bible.⁹ I am not prepared to say that Maimonides advocated a Jewish mission to Christians, but he clearly hoped that in sporadic, personal encounters, Jews might be able to demonstrate the superiority of their faith.

Similarly, I am convinced that in the streets of medieval Christian Europe, some Jews challenged their Christian neighbors with arguments designed to prove the truth of Judaism, though here too these contacts do not add up to a Jewish mission or near-mission. The motive was primarily to reinforce Jewish morale, not to create a cadre of proselytes.¹⁰ This motive also plays a role in moderating my earlier observation about the desire of some medieval Jews for the damnation and destruction of their oppressors. Such a desire conflicts with the hope for eschatological vindication, a hope that provides its full measure of psychological benefit only if the deniers of Judaism acknowledge their error at the end of days and proclaim, in the words of the High Holiday liturgy, “The Lord God of Israel is King, and his kingship rules over all.”¹¹

Jacob Katz argued that by the sixteenth century, the assertiveness that marked medieval Jewish attitudes toward Christianity, particularly in Northern Europe, began to wane, and that this transformation also affected attitudes toward converts and conversion. The Jewish community had turned inward and no longer sought to impress the Christian world with its ability to attract outsiders. But as Jews moved toward modernity, other considerations emerged. Significant authorities began to affirm that Christianity is not considered *avodah zarah* when practiced by non-Jews. Thus, the likelihood that Christians could attain salvation increased exponentially. For Moses Mendelssohn, religious toleration became an almost transcendent ideal, and he famously expressed dissatisfaction with Maimonides’ requirement that the Noahide Code confers salvation only upon those who accept it as revelation.¹² R. Israel Lipschutz, an important nineteenth-century commentator on the Mishnah, asserted as an almost self-evident truth that God would not fail to provide heavenly reward to Johannes Reuchlin for his defense of Jewish books against those who would have destroyed them.¹³

If Christians can attain salvation as Christians, the motive for a Jewish mission is markedly diminished. In modern times, this is often taken for granted as *the* reason why Jews have refrained from proselytizing. In other words, Jewish opposition to mission is a function of a deeply held principle recognizing the salvific potential of other religions. As we have seen, the history of Jewish attitudes regarding this question is far more complicated, but there is an

⁹ *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. by Joshua Blau (Jerusalem, 1989), no. 149.

¹⁰ See the argument in my “Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 576-591.

¹¹ For a discussion of the scholarly debate about these matters, see my “On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Ashkenazic Polemical Literature,” pp. 74-91. Several participants in that debate also pointed to a medieval hymn in the High Holiday liturgy that describes in recurrent, celebratory language how all the world’s inhabitants will gather to worship the true God. For an English translation of this hymn, see, for example, *The Complete Artscroll Machzor: Rosh Hashanah* (New York, 1986), pp. 495, 497.

¹² For a translation and discussion of the relevant passage, see, for example, Steven Schwarzchild, “Do Noahides Have to Believe in Revelation?” in *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, ed. by Menachem Kellner (Albany, 1990), p. 36.

¹³ *Tiferet Yisrael to Avot 3:14 (Boaz #1)*.

element of truth in this assertion even with respect to the pre-modern period. As Allen Friedman has put it in an oral communication, medieval Christians and Muslims did not expect to meet anyone who was not a co-religionist in heaven; even Jews with a restrictive view of salvation expected to meet a few righteous gentiles.

Thus far, I have addressed the views of Jews in a traditional society and their Orthodox successors in modern times. It goes without saying that almost all non-Orthodox Jews maintain that Christianity provides its adherents with the ability to find favor in the eyes of God, and those non-Orthodox Jews who believe in an afterlife affirm that good Christians have a portion in the World to Come. For such Jews, proselytizing is a symptom of an intolerant, even immoral theology of exclusion. While Reform Judaism has, after much soul-searching, affirmed the desirability of outreach to non-Jews with the hope of attracting them to Judaism, these efforts are restricted to “unchurched” gentiles or—sometimes—to Christians who have married or plan to marry Jews. Committed Christians remaining within their own community remain beyond the scope of such initiatives for reasons not only of pragmatism but of principle.

Before attempting to assess how Jewish attitudes toward missionizing may affect current interactions between Christians and Jews, we need to turn, however briefly, to historic Christian approaches toward missionary activity directed at Jews. It is hardly necessary to say that classical Christianity strove to spread the good news and that Jews were not excluded as objects of this effort. At the same time, a theology developed that granted Jews special, even unique toleration both because they were seen as witnesses to the truth of Christianity and because Romans 11, however one reads it, speaks of their continued separate existence when the fullness of the nations arrives.¹⁴ Thus, although it was clearly desirable for individual Jews to save themselves through conversion, systematic efforts to convert large numbers of Jews were rare before the thirteenth century. An article on Jewish conversion in thirteenth-century England in a recent issue of *Speculum* asserts that even at this relatively late date, Robert Grosseteste “view[ed] Jewish conversion as a consequence of the end of history rather than as a current possibility or even a desire.”¹⁵

Though the vision of Jewish conversion at the end of days persisted, the thirteenth-century saw the exponential growth of efforts to convert the Jews en masse. As time passed, some of these efforts developed an eschatological perspective linked to the belief that Jewish conversion must precede the imminent end of days, while others resulted from the desire to establish a uniformly Christian Europe. The earlier absence of conversionary programs does not bespeak a strong interest in the welfare of Jewish souls, and I see little indication that the primary motive of the new policy was a sudden concern for the fate of Jews who would otherwise be condemned to hellfire, though some missionaries undoubtedly took satisfaction in the benefit that they brought to the objects of their ministry. The treatment of new Christians in *this* world certainly left much to be desired. They were sometimes deprived of their property, the conditions in the halfway houses for converts were often lamentable, and other efforts to meet the needs of individuals removed from their families and support systems were sporadic and generally inadequate.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of Christian readings of this difficult chapter, see Jeremy Cohen, “The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation: Romans 11:25-26 in Patristic and Medieval Exegesis,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005): 247-281.

¹⁵ Ruth Nisse, “‘Your name will no longer be Asenath’: Apocrypha, Anti-martyrdom, and Jewish Conversion in Thirteenth-Century England,” *Speculum* 81 (2006): 738-739.

¹⁶ See, for example, Robert C. Stacey, “The Conversion of Jews to Christianity in thirteenth-century England,” *Speculum* 67 (1992): 263-83.

When converts were suspected of judaizing in late-medieval-and-early-modern Iberia, they were of course subjected to terrible consequences. Here we confront the logic of imposing one's faith on an unwilling other in its most acute form, since the torments inflicted by the Inquisition were imposed at least in part for the sake of the immortal souls of the unfortunate judaizers. But the souls of unconverted Jews are presumably just as destined to damnation as those of insincere converts, so that as a matter of cold logic the policies of the Inquisition could just as well have been applied to the former. But they were not. The tradition of toleration, even in an age of expulsions and intense missionary pressures, maintained some modicum of its original standing.¹⁷

And so we return to modern and contemporary times. The question of the propriety of a Christian mission directed at Jews depends first of all on the underlying theology of salvation maintained by the Christian group in question. Such theologies range across a broad spectrum:

- Jews, like all other non-Christians, are condemned to eternal hellfire.
- Non-Christians, including Jews, are at a distinct disadvantage in the struggle for salvation, but such salvation is not ruled out.¹⁸
- Jews, uniquely among adherents of non-Christian religions, can be saved no less readily than Christians because they are already with the Father.
- Salvation is readily available to all good people irrespective of religion.

Even the last two positions do not in themselves rule out proselytizing since spreading the good news could be desirable or obligatory because of the inherent value of ultimate truth without reference to the eternal destiny of the non-Christian. Still, the first two positions, and especially the harsher of the two, greatly strengthen the argument for an active mission.

How then does a Jew, or at least this Jew, respond to such an argument? As long ago as 1983, I expressed strong opposition to Jewish efforts to instruct Christians about what to believe regarding their own religion, and I have repeated this position on numerous subsequent occasions. I confessed, however, that with respect to missionizing, "even Jews who hesitate most about intervention in the internal affairs of Christianity have some mixed feelings." I went on to say that "the Jewish mandate to protect Jews from conversion is no less a religious requirement than any Christian mandate to convert them, and, although my basic sympathies are with the 'non-interventionists,' in the case of aggressive missionizing aimed specifically at Jews, the overriding principle of *pikkuah nefesh*, or preventing danger to life (including spiritual life), may well prevail."¹⁹ In short, if I could persuade a Christian uncertain of his or her position regarding mission to the Jews that proper Christian belief should affirm the possibility of salvation for unconverted Jews, I would try to do this.

Nonetheless, I do not regard honest advocates of proselytizing who adhere to the harshest position regarding Jewish salvation as evil in any sense. Thus, I take the position that someone who has declared war on me and my people is nonetheless a fine person whom I can embrace

¹⁷ For a discussion of both elements constituting the tension in the Church's position, see Kenneth Stow, *Alienated Minority* (Cambridge, Mass. And London, 1992), pp. 242-273.

¹⁸ This is the position expressed in the controversial Catholic document *Dominus Iesus*. See my analysis in "Dominus Iesus and the Jews," *America* 185:7 (September 17, 2001): 7-12, also available at <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/berger.htm>. Reprinted in *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus*, ed. by Stephen J. Pope and Charles C. Hefling, New York, 2002, pp. 39-46.

¹⁹ "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983): 17-18.

as a friend in other contexts. There is, of course, an emotional tension in this position, and I ask myself whether an argument for Jewish exceptionalism can be formulated that does not impinge on Christian doctrine. I think it possible that this question can be answered in the affirmative. Christians in the modern world, including those with exclusivist views of salvation, definitively reject coercive methods, whether physical or economic, to enforce conformity to Christian belief and practice, and they do this not only because such methods would be ineffective but because they abhor them in principle. This appears to mean that even saving another's soul does not outweigh all competing considerations. One who refrains from religious coercion recognizes that the apparently transcendent benefit does not outweigh the harm done to the coercer's moral personality, to that of his or her collective, or to civil society as a whole, not to speak of the immediate suffering of the presumed beneficiary.

In light of these considerations, we are now in a position to ask if there is any moral harm inflicted by non-coercive proselytizing. It can certainly damage, even poison, intergroup relations, and it renders respectful dialogue about religious matters next to impossible. These concerns apply to proselytizing directed at any group; the question is whether they are serious enough to set aside the salvific advantage of conversion to Christianity. At the very least, they may persuade Christians who believe that the other party's salvation is not at stake to eschew active missionizing.

In dealing with Jews, the moral objections to conversionary efforts increase exponentially. First, even in an open society, there is a tinge of pressure, if not genuine coercion, when members of a majority religion carry out sustained campaigns to convince the minority to abandon its faith. In 1988, the *New York Times* published a letter in which I objected to their accepting advertisements from "Jews for Jesus" containing biblical prooftexts for Christian doctrines. Setting aside the well-known issue of the ethically objectionable misappropriation of Jewish symbols, the letter argued that publishing such religious polemic puts a Jewish respondent in an untenable position. Jews would either have to explain in a counter-ad why the verses in question cannot legitimately be understood christologically, which "would pollute the atmosphere of interfaith relations and create concrete dangers for the Jewish minority," or they would have to remain silent, thus accepting "a quasi-medieval position of being bombarded by public attacks on their faith without opportunity for candid response."²⁰

Second, the history of Christian treatment of Jews is genuinely relevant to this moral calculus. The Jewish community reacts to missionary efforts by Christians through the prism of crusades, Inquisition, blood libels, accusations of host desecration and well poisoning, depictions of Jews as instruments of the devil, and assorted massacres. This reaction is not merely understandable; it is thoroughly legitimate. The Jewish people managed to survive these religiously motivated efforts to destroy it, but contemporary efforts to wipe it out by kinder means are tainted by this history. Like it or not, the Christian missionary to the Jews is continuing the work of Count Emicho, Vincent Ferrer, Torquemada, and Chmielnicki. "Jews for Jesus" can proclaim as loudly and as often as they wish that these persecutors of Jews were not Christians, but there is no avoiding the fact that they acted and were perceived as acting in the name of Christianity. Even if proselytizing other groups is appropriate, proselytizing Jews is arguably not.

Let me end more softly by returning to my anti-interventionist mode. In a contemporary context, it is a matter of the first importance to recognize that belief in eschatological verification is very different from mission. I have made this point in several essays, but it bears repetition here.

²⁰ "Jews for Jesus Ad Poses Painful Choices," *The New York Times*, January 9, 1988, p. 26.

Participants in dialogue often affirm that even the assertion that your faith will be vindicated at the end of days constitutes morally objectionable triumphalism. I regard this position as itself morally objectionable. Both Jews and Christians are entitled to believe that their respective religions are true in a deep and uncompromising sense, and that this truth will become evident to all the world in the fullness of time.