

Is There a Jewish Theology or Not?

By Steven Maimes

Judaism is the religion, philosophy and way of life of the Jewish people. And within Judaism, there are big divisions. Besides religious Jews who believe in God, there are cultural or ethnic Jews. An ethnic or cultural Jew is a person of Jewish parentage and background who does not necessarily believe in God or practice Judaism, but still identifies with Judaism or other Jews culturally.

Neither the Old Testament nor Talmudic Judaism defines a Jew in terms of beliefs. A Jew was a person born of a Jewish mother or a person converted to Judaism. While some Jewish thinkers have sought to impose a systematic approach to Jewish thought, neither biblical nor rabbinic sources consider the condition of theological concepts as essential.

Theology is the study of God and of revelation. Theology of a religion is defined as the organized thought of what followers of the religion *believe* about God or are expected to believe about God. Theology always includes belief; without belief it is simply philosophy of religion.

Judaism can be split into two major divisions – those who know that they believe in God and those who do not. Because of this division, there is no collective authentic Jewish theology that applies to the modern Jewish religion. Judaism has no organized thought about what its followers believe about God and also lacks a centralized authority that would dictate such belief.

Many religious Jews, especially the orthodox and conservative denominations, do believe in God and express a Jewish theology. However this theology is not accepted by the majority of Jews. For some, the term *Jewish theology* assumes that there is a specific discipline separate from the study of Jewish history, Jewish philosophy, Jewish literature, Jewish sociology, the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Zohar, and rabbinics.

Theology discusses fundamental beliefs about God; these are the dogmas held by a religion. Judaism has no systematic dogma and belief is often not discussed. Jewish religious law (Halacha) is widely discussed in place of belief.

Dogma is the established belief or doctrine held by a religion. It is authoritative and not to be disputed, doubted, or diverged from, by the practitioners or believers. **Halacha** is Jewish religious law; a literal translation might be “the path that one walks” or “the way.” It is the collective body of religious laws including Biblical law (613 commandments) and later Talmudic and rabbinic law, to regulate religious observances and the daily life and conduct of the Jewish people.

As a non-creedal (dogma) religion, some have argued that Judaism does not require one to believe in God (which is itself a dogma). For some, observance of Jewish law (Halacha) is more

important than belief in God. This emphasis on practice is actually based on invoking the revelation of God. Once a thinker invokes revelation, one moves beyond the boundaries of Halacha to theology. In addition, with their overemphasis on practice, some Jews become unwilling to discuss beliefs or theory. The trouble is, over the years, the beliefs themselves have not been clearly defined.

In ancient times faith and belief were taken for granted. In modern times, some liberal Jewish movements do not accept the existence of a God active in history. Because of this, many different variations on the basic beliefs are considered within the scope of Judaism – at least for non-religious Jews.

Moses Maimonides (12th century) in his commentary on the Mishnah formulates *13 Principles of Faith* that have been accepted by most religious Jews. The first principle is belief in God. Otherwise, Judaism has been averse to any systematization of its beliefs.

Traditional arguments for the existence of God are almost ignored by Jewish thinkers. Believers in God assume that there is a God, both transcendent and immanent, the Creator who brought the universe into existence and who extends control over it. This position is affirmed by faith, and a belief can neither be verified nor falsified. In addition to faith, the mystics spoke of the direct experience of God and also noted that God is beyond all human comprehension.

Although not considered dogma or creed, Judaism does have a history of systematic thought and partial theology. Some examples from the past 2,000 years include: *The Talmud* (completed around 500) includes some theology and lots of discussion. Saadia Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (933) contains some theological proofs of Judaism. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (1180) contains summaries of Halacha and principles of faith. Yosef Karo's Code of Jewish Law (*Shulchan Aruch*, 1565) is a legal code of Halacha. Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism (late 18th century) has a comprehensive Jewish mystical theology.

The fact that Judaism is divided into believers and non-believers is not new and probably always existed. One important historical period to consider is the time of the Second Temple and the first century. At that time there was also a division – it may have been a division between the true Jewish religion and a fading religion. The Second Temple was destroyed in 70 and the Jewish people were dispersed both geographically and religiously. In terms of religion, prayer replaced sacrifice and the era of rabbinic Judaism began.

Something else entered into history at that time – Jesus of Nazareth and the birth of Christianity. This new religion was founded by first-century Jews who sought the continuation of the work of God. They found this renewal in the historical Jesus and in the movement of God by the Holy Spirit.

Getting back to theology, God and revelation, we need to look at Jewish and Christian theology together. The statement *God gave the Torah to Israel* can and should be approached theologically by Jews in the same manner as the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Jewish theologians

have the same problem as Christian theologians have had throughout the ages; of the relationship between the divine and human elements in the Torah, and between the time-conditioned and the eternal.

Christianity has a unique perspective on theology that appealed to first century Jews. It was simply that revelation continued from God. True Christian theology has a mystic flavor: one must experience God to truly formulate theology. Theology is not just discussion but experienced as well.

This experiential, spirit-filled way and approach to God is exactly what Jesus brought to the Jews. The language and reality of God the father, Jesus the one sent by God, and of the Holy Spirit from God. This "Christian" message for Jews includes a renewal of the basic belief in God and relationship with God. The discussion of this God and revelation is theology.

There are three Abrahamic religions that branch out from Abraham's faith and belief in one God, it is important to acknowledge all of them when discussing theology. These following numbers alone attest to the fact that the revelation from God has continued since the first century: There are 2.3 billion Christians (33% of the world's population) and there are 1.6 billion Muslims (24% of the world's population). The God of Abraham continues to speak while the form of religion changes.

Judaism represents only 0.2% of the world's population with 14 million followers. Of the 14 million Jews, we could say one-third is religious, one-third is liberal or mixed in belief, and one-third is secular. These numbers are very small when compared to Christian and Muslim believers. It is estimated that 80% of Christians and Muslims believe in God.

Nearly half of the modern Jews do not believe in God. They have no Jewish theology and perhaps have lost the essence of Judaism for lack of faith. For the Jewish believers in God, Jewish theology is alive and can and should be discussed more often.

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