



21. How Do The Other Religions Relate To Christianity?

This is a very big subject to tackle in a short space. I can best do so by starting with the great Monotheistic faiths, that is, those that believe in only one God (Judaism and Islam), then a religion that believes in many Gods, or, perhaps, that everything is God (Hinduism), then in a religion that seems in one form to say that God is nothing (Buddhism). After that, we shall see. Throughout it must be remembered that I am having to compress what I have to say into a very small space, so inevitably there will be over-simplification and distortion. If, by this, I cause offence to anyone I apologise in advance.

Judaism is the root from which Christianity has sprung. Just as Christianity has changed over the years and taken different forms, so has Judaism.

The Temple-based worship portrayed in the Old Testament was much modified in the centuries after the return of the Jews from Babylon, where the focus had shifted to the synagogue as a place for the expounding of the Law of God and the words of the Prophets. With the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, and the expulsions of the Jews from Jerusalem, sacrificial worship ceased entirely. Judaism became focussed almost entirely on the study and interpretation of the Torah by the Rabbis (who are not, strictly speaking, Priests), the observance of the Jewish Holy Days, and the keeping of ritual purity, including separation from the Gentiles. The acceptance of Gentile 'God-fearers' at synagogue worship came to an end - most of them had become Christians.

Babylon remained a great centre of Jewish learning, since many of the exiled Jews had chosen to remain there. As a consequence, two versions of the Talmud, the great collection of Rabbinical lore and commentary, were produced; one in Babylon, the other based on the traditions of Jerusalem. The Jews became divided into two broad streams, the Ashkenazim, in Europe, and the Sephardim, who spread along the southern shore of the Mediterranean to Spain, and from there to England and back to the Turkish Empire.

Judaism developed a mystical tradition called the Kabbala, based on meditation on God as Creator. This evolved into an elaborate system involving numbers, letters and colours, and an elaboration of the Divine Name. This moves from the utterly unknowable ('En Sof'), through the divine Wisdom ('Hokhmah'), Intelligence ('Binah') and other stages, to the revealed Kingdom ('Malkuth') or Glory ('Shekinah') in creation. Curiously, in some later

forms this parallels the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

In Poland in the 18th Century, a there developed a form of mysticism coupled with observance of the Law, called Hasidism. This laid great emphasis on ecstatic union with the divine, coupled with the joyful, not penitential, performance of the works prescribed by the law. All of life, to the great Hassidic Rabbis, was worship. Through this, they believed, the whole of Creation would be redeemed. This doctrine was disapproved of by the more strictly Orthodox.

In Germany, on the other hand, under the influence of the ideas of the Enlightenment, a new, modernised and simplified form of Judaism was devised called Reform or Liberal Judaism, which took a more relaxed view of the requirements of the Law. With the destruction of German Jewry under Nazism, its main centre is now America.

Historically, relations between Christianity and Judaism have been very bad. From the time of the writing of the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, Christians have been heretics and blasphemers to the Jews. Christians have returned the accusation with interest, calling the Jews Christ-killers (a charge now withdrawn in the West).

In mediaeval times the so-called 'blood libel' declared that once a year the Jews stole and sacrificed a Christian baby to mix its blood with the Passover bread. As is well known, Christian mobs regularly attacked Jewish communities. This was exacerbated and provided with an intellectual base by the forgery and circulation of the so-called 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. Only in our own time have determined efforts been made to end centuries of hostility and suspicion.

Meanwhile Orthodox Jews continue to believe that through them the world will be blessed and to look for the coming of the promised Messiah, who will restore them to the Land of Promise. Zionist Jews, on the other hand, look for a political salvation of the nation through the physical possession of the Holy Land, and their reintegration in the State of Israel.

We Christians have to acknowledge that without Judaism, our own religion could not have existed. We cannot escape the great fact that Jesus was a Jew, and thought and expressed himself in Jewish terms. Without its Jewish background, Christianity is meaningless. (More on this in further articles.)