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## Pluralism & Peoplehood

### A biblical model of reconciliation can help bring Jews and Christians together.

By Rabbi Irving Greenberg

*The author, a theologian who has written widely on the Holocaust and on Jewish-Christian relations, has long been an advocate for dialogue between Jews and Christians. As he notes, his views are often controversial and opposed by many, especially Orthodox Jews. In the following piece, he calls for a rethinking of the Jewish-Christian relationship and offers his thoughts on how to start. Reprinted with permission from For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: the New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity ([Jewish Publication Society](#)).*

For both Judaism and Christianity, this is a time to reinterpret their relationships to one another.

This new analysis must include an understanding of God's pluralism--that no religion has a monopoly on God's love. The Noahide covenant [between God and all humanity] lives; both faiths articulate and extend its mandate, but, in so doing, they do not have an exclusive divine mission that renders other religions irrelevant. On the contrary, they need the help of other religions to accomplish *tikkun olam* [repairing the world], and they can instruct and enrich the others along the way.

### Role Models

Judaism and Christianity are the two ancient faiths that have most experienced the freedom and power--and most internalized the reconceptualization of human understanding--that is the outcome of modernity. These are also the two religions that have seen close up the failures and experienced directly the pathologies of modernity.

Both have much to digest and much to teach other faiths and cultures by analysis and role-modeling. The modeling must start with the two erstwhile antagonists, who built their religious claims on the invalidity of the other, affirming each other's independent dignity as ongoing, legitimate covenantal faiths. Yet, at the same time, this mutual affirmation does not negate the ongoing areas of disagreement, theological and otherwise.

But mere achievement of pluralism will not do justice to the uniqueness of the Jewish-Christian connection. Even if the two faiths enrich pluralism--by developing language and teaching models of deepened self-commitment combined with mutual affirmation--they will still only scratch the surface. The two self-described peoples of Israel must come to grips with the fact that they are both the children of Abraham--albeit they attain this status in different ways.

### Abraham & Sarah

The patriarch [Abraham] and Sarah were both promised that they would become the ancestors of many nations and that this development would be a blessing to the world (see Genesis 17:4-7 and 17:15-16). Theologians of several traditions have argued that the promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Ishmael and in the Muslim *umma* [nation], which identifies Hagar's son as its eponymous hero. However, taking Sarah's blessing seriously implies that yet another nation will grow out of--or join as a branch of--her descendants, Isaac and/or Jacob/Israel.

Jewish tradition has long recognized that one need not be a genetic descendant of Abraham to become one of his children. Since the family is on a mission to teach, exemplify, and realize the covenant of redemption, one who accepts this calling can be born into the people of Israel through conversion. Once this joining takes place, all future descendants who carry on this line of the covenant are part of the people Israel.

Given this fact, Judaism should factor in some understanding of the billions of gentiles who joined in the covenantal mission en masse even if they joined through a different narrative and lived as another (separate) part of the family. True, that part of the family once denied the legitimacy of this part; but when they acknowledge their error and stop the false denial, their conscious membership in Abraham's family should be integrated in some way.

## **Arguments & Counter-Arguments**

Many Jews will respond to this proposal: Absolutely not! The gentiles who joined the Abrahamic covenant (as they understood it) did not meet any of Judaism's conversion standards; they did not embrace the life and practices of the Jewish people. Therefore, their intentions carry no religious weight in Judaism, and their commitments represent no ethical claim for recognition. Some would reject this proposal even more sharply. "Would you murder and take possession?" (1 Kings 21:19).

After 2,000 years of Christianity demeaning Judaism as well as persecuting and killing Jews while trying to seize the name Israel by force, will Jews now voluntarily surrender the crown of a good name to Christianity's believers? Just because some Christians are sorry for what they did and some others want reconciliation?

To this argument, the counter-response is: Do Christians not also merit recognition under Isaiah's thrice repeated rubric, "so you [the people of Israel] are My witnesses, declares the Lord--and I am God" (Isaiah 43:12; see also 43:10, 44:8)? Are there not hundreds of millions of human beings who had never heard of the God of Creation until Christians sought them out and testified to them about the God of Israel, who is the God of Creation, who loves them and wants them to be redeemed?

Even if Christians spoke to gentiles about Jesus as Lord, did they not, in the end, bring these people to the God of Israel, whom Jesus worshiped as Lord? These untold millions would never have known of the God of Israel but for Christians' repeated witness to them, until the people were convinced; and when they heard that the Lord had taken note of them and that God had seen their plight, then they bowed low in homage.

And what about Isaiah's vision that some day "My house will be a house of prayer for all the nations" (Isaiah 56:7)? Will this prophesy be fulfilled only by complete world conversion to Judaism? Is there no credit to Christianity for bringing billions to pray to the God of Israel? Is there no recognition that those Christians overwhelmingly acknowledge Jerusalem as a holy city and the Land of Israel as a special place of Divine Presence?

Is it so that our Father in heaven has only one blessing for one child and none for all the other children of God--even those who, in good faith, consciously intended to join Abraham's family covenant? Is there not a precedent for reconciliation and sharing the blessing that after many years of distance and alienation, Isaac and Ishmael came together to honor their common father, Abraham (see Genesis 25:9; see also verses 10-18)?

The children of the two sons remained distinct families, pursuing their own histories; yet at the same time, in honoring their common father, did the brothers not recognize themselves as branches of one family? Can this account in Genesis not serve as model and precedent for linking Jews and Christians today in a bond of family?

## **A Post-Script**

*The author adds the following as a footnote:*

Even as I write, I acknowledge that the sweeping nature of the proposals for transforming the relationship between Jews and Christians will be difficult for traditional Jews to consider. In my Own Orthodox community, in particular, the question will be raised: By what authority are these suggestions made?

The primary validation, I believe, is derived from the overriding moral and theological necessity to respond to the Holocaust and the recognition that the Shoah is [a revelational event](#). This response is driven by and directly connected to the recognition of the image of God in Christians (and others).

I have followed the logic of these responses and I take the responsibility upon myself. Nevertheless, for those for whom some great tree is needed to hang such ideas on, I call attention to [the 14th-century sage] Menachem HaMeiri's broad-scale views declaring that Christians (and Muslims) are a "people bound by religion, which removes their religion from the category of idolatry and places them fully within the universe of moral obligation of Jews."...

Meiri's willingness to apply the *halakhic*--Jewish law--guidelines to behavior by bringing Christians inside the mutual obligation universe is based on his philosophical analysis of the various religions' status; this aspect of his approach is particularly important as a precedent.)

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Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg was the president of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and founding president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. He also is the author of [For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity](#) (2004, *Jewish Publication Society*).