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I Believe

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Christian-Jewish Symposium

(The Christian part of a two-part symposium on personal belief. See also the [Jewish part](#)).

From what I can tell, almost every ancient religion had a personal epithet for its deity. In the case of some there were many deities and therefore many epithets. Even in the case of the monotheistic ancient Hebrew faith God had what we might term an identifying name which, in the mist of polytheism, was to set the God of Israel over and against all possible competing gods.

In English translations of the Hebrew text that singularly identifying appellation is usually rendered The LORD and so the real force and purpose of the original is lost.

For example in the central Hebraic/Jewish affirmation referred to as the *Shema'* because of its opening dinderive the usual translation is:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

The original is thus stripped of its essential forcefulness.

What is translated as "the LORD" is, in Hebrew, signified by four letters, indeed, four consonants. These are the Hebrew *yod*, *hé*, *vav* and again *hé*.

These four consonants enshrined the ancient identifying name of the God of Israel, not least as that God who had become known to Moses. How it was pronounced remains, even to this day, something of a mystery, for the initial pronunciation was deliberately and very effectively repressed as the faith and the expression of the faith became more and more theologically sophisticated. When these four consonants were read they were accompanied, not by vowels that would betray the less developed understanding of God, but by vowels of a completely distinct word, namely, *Adonai*, which is suitably translated as "the LORD".

Why this long preamble? Well, my initial purpose in raising this matter was to indicate that how we talk about God and what we mean by that seemingly simple term are mostly conditioned by our environment. In ancient Israel's case, in very early times, it made sense to have an identifying epithet for one's own God at a stage in their religious understanding and, I should say, development, when the efficacy of other gods was denied but not their existence. The environment was polytheistic - the leaders of Hebraic thought recognised that - and how the God of Israel was presented, so to speak, was in terms of that religious context.

So, then the *Shema'* is best translated:

Hear, O Israel: YHVH is our God, YHVH alone. (Deut. 6:4)

That, incidentally, is the translation that the great mediaeval Jewish scholar, Rashi, would have

approved.

All that I am talking about, at the moment, is the influence of the environment, the context, religiously, culturally, politically and socially. All of these factors play a part in how we think.

What I am not suggesting, even though I earlier used the word “development”, is that there is, in the Bible, anything akin to an ascending, evolutionary understanding of God as though always what is late must be superior to what is early. Some of the most majestic and enduring insights have come from such luminaries as Moses, Amos, Isaiah and, of course, the psalmists.

My second purpose in speaking of the hiddenness, the deliberate hiddenness, of the name of God in the biblical tradition was to note a similar practice even within areas of modern, traditional Judaism. I am referring to the way in which the term God – GOD – is circumvented both in speech and in writing. In speech, most often, there is substituted for the Hebrew, *Elohim* or the English, God, the expression *ha-Shem* – meaning “the Name”. In writing, what happens, is that the vowel is simply omitted and so we are left with G-D. The origin of this, and its purpose in some sections of Jewish practice, I leave to others to explain. For me, although I do not adopt it, it has a symbolic significance. In an age when we might be inclined to think that we have all the answers, it is a forceful reminder that there are still some huge gaps in our knowledge. More specifically, it should warn us against any temptation to emulate the builders of the Tower of Babel. Such is human finitude that, no matter how strenuously we climb, our feet never really leave the ground. When we speak of God, of our belief in God, we should keep in check both our own claims and any tendency to sit in judgement upon the claims of others.

Throughout my teaching career I tried to impress, upon my students two things:

- First, that there is NO question that may not legitimately be asked.
- Second – and this has recently been superbly put by Sir Gerard Brennan, former Chief Justice of the High Court – “Is truth so fragile that it cannot be openly examined and debated?”

Perhaps in stating those two points I have signalled the fact that I find myself in tension with some of the traditional beliefs and doctrines of the church. I could not attend to the topic of this lecture series without gearing myself to speak honestly and frankly, yet mindful of what I referred to a moment ago as the finitude of human beings, not least this one. What I have chosen to do is not to set forth a series of propositions that might be expanded and defended (or otherwise) but to try to describe the way in which my beliefs have developed under certain influences.

There have been three main influences that have affected my thinking over a period of some four decades. These are:

1. The introduction to, and engagement in, an analytical, historical-critical approach to the Bible;
2. A long involvement in the area of the betterment of relations between Jews and Christians;
3. The recognition of the importance for theology of the scientific advances of the past century or so, not least in the area of astrophysics and cosmology – what I might refer to clumsily in my own experience as “the stretching of one’s horizon”.

The Analytical, Historical-Critical Approach

Does such a study necessarily diminish the importance of this sacred literature? That is the fore-runner of a whole host of questions that come to mind.

- Does the Bible still have a place in the determination of Christian belief?
- If so, what is its role?

- For those of us who adopt what I have been calling an analytical approach to the Scriptures, that is, a non-biblicist, non-literal, non-fundamentalist approach, what is the ground that we wish to hold at all costs?
- Is the determination of that secure ground anything more than a personal and somewhat arbitrary choice?

These are just a few of the more obvious questions to indicate that I take the Bible with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, it is the time and energy spent in that analytical, historical-critical approach to the Bible that indicates the seriousness with which the particular school of thought to which I subscribe does take this subject.

This is the method of biblical study to which I was introduced as a student within the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Edinburgh in the mid-fifties. Substantially, I have held to it since that time, and this has embraced thirty-three years of lecturing to students, most of whom, I trust, have learnt something.

Methods of biblical study, other than the conservative-fundamentalist, have presented themselves over the years. We have had the constructionists, the reconstructionists and the deconstructionists. Perhaps I am old-fashioned, but I have always insisted that, the better our knowledge of the circumstances in which a text arose and the purpose for which it was written and transmitted, the better might we be able to discern not only its initial impact but its continuing value and validity as definitive literature of a religious community. Accumulating this necessary initial contextual and ongoing contextual knowledge is by no means an easy or straightforward assignment and there will always be gaps in our knowledge. Competent scholarship is as much aware of these gaps as it is of the gains and the conclusions it draws and will give full weight to both. But, to my mind, exacting an exercise as it is, with the ever-present possibility of imprecision, it is, nevertheless, essential if the Bible is to be used sensibly.

When I speak of the Bible, I mean both the Hebrew Scriptures (the "Old" Testament so-called) and the New Testament. The latter makes little or no sense without the former but, unfortunately, throughout most of the history of the Church, the Hebrew Scriptures have been made to serve the purpose of the New Testament, not least as some kind of treasure-trove of prophecies which had to await the rise of Christianity for their fulfilment. It is only in relatively recent years that, within the Church, the Hebrew Scriptures have been studied and used in their own right.

On the matter of reading texts in their context, let me give an example or two of the way in which the failure to do so may lead to misinterpretation, indeed, sometimes to damaging misrepresentation: Take the case of the law of retaliation – the Lex Talionis – found in Exod., Lev. and Deut. as *"an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"*.

The purpose of this law was that where there was no ready judicial system, where justice was meted out by means of retaliation, this would be limited in both kind and degree. Later, in the history of ancient Israel, this purpose no longer held and so a monetary settlement was humanely invoked. To quote this law as though, somehow, it is representative of Jewish thought and practice is to use it in a mischievous and harmful way.

Reinterpretation was the means by which certain provisions within the Torah, the biblical law-code, were kept in step with changing circumstances: hence the rise of the oral Torah which eventually found its extant form in the Mishnah and Gemara which, together, constitute the Talmud.

Another example is found outside the Torah, in the historical books. In 2 Samuel, David conducts a census of the people, ostensibly to gauge the strength of his army, thus displaying lack of faith in God. But the text explicitly says that it was God who tempted David to act in this way and this was very much in accord with ancient belief that saw the deity as the prime force in every action.

However, many centuries later, when the same episode is recounted in the book of Chronicles, it is not God who instigates the census but Satan, the avowed opponent of God. A new force, hitherto not accounted for in the Hebrew religious experience, now enters the picture and becomes an important player in ensuing Jewish and later, Christian belief.

In like manner, it is possible to trace the means by which a belief in life after death became a possibility in ancient Israel. The first explicit statement of resurrection is as late as the book of Daniel in circa 165 BCE. Its appeal, however, was not universal. If the history of belief in life after death can be documented, does not that suggest that the imperative may have arisen within the province of human expectation rather than form part of a divinely decreed order of existence? Popular belief may see it as an essential ingredient of biblical religion, but, despite its appeal during the early centuries of the Church among a gentile population that feared death, it was relatively late on the scene.

So far, with the possible exception of the last point, what I have said has avoided any controversy. It has moved within the parameters of the usual safe analytical approach. We have avoided the charge that what is being spoken of is no more than a reversion to 19th century liberal theology. But what if we trespass a little on the sacred territory of traditional dogma? What if we raise questions about, say, sacrifice in its biblical context, or the use of the expression applied to Jesus in the New Testament and elsewhere, Son of God?

How did Jesus' disciples react to his death? When we examine this matter, in the words of an American New Testament scholar, "we come to the great creative contribution of Christian theology to first-century Jewish messianism". That may well be so, but what we have in the early and later Christian explanation of the tragic and premature death of Jesus moves far beyond any notion of messianism then or ever entertained within Judaism. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is it even remotely suggested that an expected messiah would die, let alone die for the sins of others as an atoning sacrifice. When Paul asserts, as he does, that "Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3) he moves far beyond any possible plain meaning of these writings. In order to explain how Paul and others came to adopt and promulgate this particular understanding of Jesus' death we have to examine the religious context of the time. I think we find some clues in the development within certain parts of Judaism, albeit on the periphery at times, of what is referred to in Jewish tradition as the *Akedah*, the "Binding of Isaac". It goes back to the dramatic incident recorded in Genesis chapter 22 where Abraham is tested by God and is required to offer his son, Isaac, as "a burnt offering" on a mountain later identified as Mt Moriah, the locale of the Jerusalem Temple. In the story in Genesis it is Abraham who is the active participant whereas Isaac is the passive victim who, incidentally, is spared. But in later tradition the roles of father and son are somewhat reversed. Isaac becomes the willing sacrifice. In one Jewish interpretation of the biblical text it is said that:

Though he (Isaac) did not die, Scripture credits Isaac with having died and his ashes having lain upon the altar. So central is Isaac's willingness in Jewish tradition that the redemptive aspect of the Temple's expiatory sacrifices become centred in the putative self-sacrifice of Isaac.

The American Jesuit scholar, Fr Robert Daly, speaks of "a considerable number of possible allusions to this developed understanding of the *Akedah* in parts of the New Testament" (see especially Romans 8:32, James 2:21-23 and Hebrews 11:17-20).

Daly makes this assertion: "I would submit not only that it is now proven that there is a relationship between the *Akedah* and the NT but also that the sacrificial soteriology of the NT can no longer be discussed without consideration of the *Akedah*." What I have tried to suggest, again, is that the explication of certain key events in the NT which became the foundation of later doctrinal statement are themselves contextually conditioned.

While some in the church will balk at the suggestion that key doctrines such as the atoning death of Jesus may have to be re-examined, there are others, also in the church, and no less women and men of faith, who question the action, indeed, the morality of a God who would willingly offer a human being, his son, for the expiation of the sins of others. We are skating on the same thin theological ice when we suggest that there is a radical movement from the use of the term *ben-elohim*, son of God, of Jesus in the narratives of the events of his time to the later claims of the Church that the expression denotes his divinity. What has to be remembered is that within a very short space of time the Jesus movement, specifically one within Judaism, became a gentile institution. Jesus, and what happened to him, were now proclaimed and explained, no longer in a Jewish environment, but in one that was essentially alien to his own, and decidedly Hellenistic in character. It was a world in which the great traditional Jewish divide between the human and the divine no longer held. It was a world in which human emperors, upon death, were deified.

If the Holy Scriptures of the Church may be studied in the analytical way that I have attempted to describe – and that is the formal position of most mainstream churches – why is there an unwillingness to treat the fourth and fifth century credal statements in the same open manner? After all, the Scriptures are regarded as the primary definitive, some would say authoritative, writings of the Church.

I have to admit that the creeds and ensuing confessional statements within my own tradition are not exempt from critical scrutiny and, I trust, measured assessment of their continuing worth, as I attempt to live as a Christian in the year 1999.

The influence of engagement in Jewish-Christian relations

This brings me to the second major influence upon my theological thinking, my long engagement, almost 35 years, in what is referred to as Jewish and Christian relations. This is related to the study and teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, an endeavour which, along with the study of Biblical Hebrew, for me began as long ago as 1952.

When I concluded my initial theological studies in Edinburgh in 1959, also the year of my ordination, indeed, even when I began my teaching career in 1961, my understanding of Judaism was what I should now refer to as little more than a caricature. I don't think that it was entirely my own fault that that was the case. It was, in fact, the inherited position of the Church in all of its communions and the scholars who presented a different understanding were very, very few in number. In the main, I did not come across the works of these until several years later. If I did read them and failed to be influenced by them at the time it was because of the sheer weight of the more immediate influence of my own lecturers and the theological writings to which I was introduced as a student. I now recognise that some of the German scholars whose works influenced me were decidedly anti-Jewish and not a few had pro-Nazi sentiments. The extent of the presence of such scholars in the theology faculties of German universities in the thirties and forties has yet to be fully investigated and admitted. Those who have been exposed as not only decidedly pro-Nazi but employed in various institutions to advance Hitler's cause include such biblical authorities as Gerhardt Kittel, the editor of the definitive multi-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, and Walter Grundmann.

I am not suggesting that any of these highly questionable motives were present in the scholars who directly influenced my thinking: far from it. They were simply reflecting, as I did during my early teaching career, the received position of the Christian Church which went back over the centuries to the situation or context in which the New Testament itself arose. An increasing number of Christian scholars now speak and write openly of that context in which apologetic, polemic and even acrimony were features of the relationship between Synagogue and Church. It has taken us almost 1900 years to come to terms with it. The essence of the scholarly Christian caricature of Judaism that held sway in the Church for so long was that Judaism was a religion of arid legalism, the presence of which brought about that faith's eventual demise and replacement by something infinitely superior,

namely, Christianity. The first signs of that supposed demise were seen in the period immediately following the return from the Babylonian exile towards the end of the sixth century BCE. As Judaism moved towards the turn of the era the legalism and the nationalistic particularism became more and more pronounced and more and more stultifying to the point where the divine rejection of his ancient People Israel was only a matter of time.

Sophisticated Christian theologians had long left behind them the naive understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures as a repository of prophecies about an expected messiah, the fulfilment of which awaited the advent of Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, the relation between the two testaments, the so-called Old and the New, was still presented in such a way as to rob the People Israel of any continuing role in the divine economy once Jesus came on the scene. It was still common for Christian scholars, even up to recent decades, to employ Emil Schurer's depiction of the Judaism of the first century CE as *Spätjudentum*, Late Judaism, that is, a Judaism in its death throes.

This portrayal of the ancient faith was undergirded by an understanding of the writings of St Paul that most modern New Testament scholars recognise as owing more to Augustine and Martin Luther than it ever did to the first century missionary apostle. But the classification of Judaism as a religion of works-righteousness, that is, one by which the favour of God is earned by observance of the Torah (law) is still very persistent. The contrast with Christianity, described most favourably as a religion of grace and faith, continues to tempt many Christian preachers.

Why this has come about cannot be understood apart from an investigation of the way in which the Jesus-movement, a movement comprising Jews and initially within Judaism, eventually moved away from the mother faith. Knowledge of the Judaism of the early and mid-first century CE, indeed, up to the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, indicates that Judaism was a relatively diverse religion. Within it, but gradually moving towards its periphery, were a number of apocalyptic groups whose writings have been preserved in the mostly Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Numbered among these apocalyptic groups were the Qumran Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jesus-movement. In the case of these two, quite separate and distinct collections of literature came into existence.

What has to be noted, especially in the case of Qumran and the nascent Church, was that their claims left no room for those of any other group. It is the nature of breakaway groups, which inevitably adopt a sectarian approach to the major body from which they have separated, not only to make exclusive claims to the truth, but to demean the other. Indeed, could one possibly expect such a separated group to "pull the religious mat from under its own feet", so to speak, by entertaining the claims of any other group? The claims to exclusivity, to be the sole custodian of truth and the lone means of salvation, have to be looked at in the context in which they have emerged. What is more, these are interior claims, supported only by their own texts, and, because of that, not subject to any historical or objective verification.

It is this approach, engendered by a recognition of Judaism as a validly, continuing religion, to be understood, not in terms imposed upon it by an initially competing faith, but in its own terms that, together with an appraisal of the apologetic and polemical context in which Christianity emerged, that has forced me to reassess the place of Jesus Christ in the divine redemptive purpose. This reassessment has led me to recognise that what has occurred through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is of no less importance stated in non-exclusivist terms than has been asserted within traditional Christianity. That Hebraic religious genius which has bequeathed to the world a majestic understanding of God flows on through the witness of the New Testament beyond the borders of the historic People Israel to the larger gentile world.

Love of God, love for one's neighbour, both injunctions of the Hebrew Scriptures, are no less binding under this theological regime than they are under any other, particularly one that denies continuing significance to the religion of their source. As for the need for forgiveness and recognition of the

divine willingness to bestow it, this too is ever present, as are also the call for justice and concern for the vulnerable of society, emphases that the Church finds as demands upon its own life when it turns to the Torah and the Prophets.

I have come to the third influence, namely, that of modern cosmology.

Modern cosmology

So far, in what I have said, I have not moved beyond what one might call a biblical understanding or presentation of religion, even though my comprehension of that may be at odds with the traditional. This biblical presentation, however, is predicated on an understanding of the universe which is vastly different to that of modern cosmology. In the Bible the world is an enclosed system created by God and subject always to the continuing activity of God who is described not only as Creator but as Redeemer, as one who steps in, from time to time, to order things according to his will. We speak of the acts of God as the deity pursues the role of the Lord of history. The biblical story is one that is played out on the historical scene with God ostensibly as the Chief Actor who gives purpose to all.

This is a very reassuring picture of a God who has everything within his/her control. Down through the ages, millions of people, of various faiths, have found comfort in the belief in such a deity. That it is extremely difficult to hold together, in the light of human experience, an understanding of God both omnipotent and all-loving, has, more often than not, failed to perturb people of faith – nor even theologians of faith! But the shape of the universe, if I might put it that way, is not, nor ever has been, that of its biblical depiction. It is not as though there is an object of divine creation, over and against a Creator who can, at will, move things along to work out a specific purpose in history. The particularity involved in God's ostensible choosing of a people through whom to work out his particular purpose becomes problematic once God ceases to be understood as over and against the universe.

What becomes even more problematical, at least for me, is the seemingly unfettered presence and perpetration of intense evil in the world. In this context I think that it is proper that we should call to mind the Holocaust, the attempt on the part of the leader of an erstwhile civilised nation with a long association with the Christian faith to eradicate an entire people. And this took place during the lifetime of most of us present here this morning. The eminent Catholic scholar Johann Baptist Metz once confided that he could not contemplate the doing of theology except in the shadow of the Holocaust. It pervaded all his thinking. I feel no less compelled to place the Holocaust centrally within my own speculation about God. In addition, my confidence as a Christian is eroded by the undeniable fact that before that horrendous event, during it, and for a considerable time afterwards, the official response of all the churches was silence, a deathly silence, in some way the climax of those attitudes to which I referred earlier.

Many theological explanations of the Holocaust have been attempted. The only ones that I would admit for serious discussion are those that call in question either the omnipotence of God or that other central and traditional divine quality, his all-loving nature. Whatever the cost, I find I have to cling to the latter, for a God who is less than all-loving is not worthy of human consideration. For that is a quality we esteem even among ourselves. Divine omnipotence, particularly in the context of modern cosmology, is, I think, dispensable.

Central to Christian description of God has been the doctrine of the Trinity clutched to the breast of the Church as though God, himself, were dependent upon such an understanding. Woe betide anyone who should be sufficiently bold or foolish to tinker, even at the edges of this notion. But how, given the infinite nature of the Universe, that one star, alone, may contain a million galaxies, given that, how can we be so adamant that even that doctrine rises above the mere human attempt to come to terms with God in a way that makes sense to us. If by the use of the expression, Triune God, Christian theologians believe that they are speaking of the essence of the deity then I must part company with them. If, on the other hand, they see the Trinitarian formula as an expression of

Christian experience then I can subscribe to it. The God of whom we speak is no other than the God who moves towards us as a Father, who, in the context of the NT, spoke in an unmistakable way through Jesus Christ and who continues to lead and inspire us by his Spirit. That, for me, is trinitarianism.

Throughout this address, I have spoken of God in clearly personal terms referring to the deity as "he", even though I recognise the shortcomings of the use of the third masculine singular pronoun. In light of what I have said about the influence of modern cosmology on any possible understanding of God, does it remain feasible to understand the deity in personal terms? My response to that question is "No" and "Yes": "No" in the sense that an anthropomorphic God is little more than a relic of the past. To speak of the hand of God, the face of God or God having a voice was to employ what was never more than an analogy. God, in order to be God, is quite other than might be signified by the use of this type of language. But there is a sense in which the answer must also embrace a "Yes" unless we are to abandon all possible communion with the deity; and that I do not wish to advocate for one moment. Whether or not we think of God in such impersonal terms as "Ground of Being", "Source of Life", "Moral Impulse" or whatever, we are doing our thinking as persons and so, in that sense, if in no other, there is a personal dimension to our faith.

A whole host of questions remain untouched. One good thing about retirement is that it allows much more time to contemplate those things that really matter and of those I think that faith is by far the more important. That, I earnestly believe!

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Source: [Gesher](#) 1999.