



OUR EXTENDED FAMILY: JUDAISM

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In the last issue, I addressed the family resemblance among the various branches of the Christian family tree. Now, I am going to turn our attention to our extended family, namely the other Abrahamic religions: Judaism and Islam. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are called “Abrahamic Religions” because they trace their spiritual ancestries back to the Hebrew patriarch, Abraham.

Pope John Paul II called Judaism “our sister,” meaning that we were very closely related to that tradition. After all, Jesus was a Jew, as were the apostles. The earliest followers of Jesus were Jewish, and saw themselves as a form of Judaism. Building on the pope’s family analogy, I would like to suggest that Judaism is our older sister. Like many older siblings, Judaism broke new ground, tested the waters, and laid a groundwork upon which her younger siblings could build. Through many centuries of religious evolution, she fine-tuned her ideas of monotheism, the Covenant, God’s ability to bring good out of bad situations, and the dignity of human beings created in the Image of God, and passed these on to their younger siblings--us.

One of the biggest mistakes the Church ever made was to think that, after Jesus, God abandoned the Jews, that their Covenant was nullified. The Church’s liturgy prayed for the “perfidious Jews.” We carried out persecutions, and even put them to death. We forgot that St. Paul said that God will never abandon the Jews, and since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has taught that authoritatively. In fact, Jews have a rich tradition of biblical scholarship, theology and spirituality that developed from the ancient world, through the Middle Ages and into the present day.

After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 AD, there were only two forms of Judaism that survived: the school of the Pharisees and the Jesus movement. As time continued, these two rival interpretations of Judaism parted ways, with the Jesus movement growing into the Christian Church, and Pharisaic school developing into rabbinic Judaism. Rabbinical schools produced commentaries on the Torah, called

the Mishnah and the Talmud. By the Middle Ages, Judaism, like Christianity, had been influenced by Greek philosophy. Moses Maimonides, a Spanish-born rabbi, incorporated elements of Aristotle’s philosophy into his study of the Torah, and he, in turn, influenced Thomas Aquinas, who lovingly calls him, “Rabbi Moses.”

A rich mystical tradition also emerged. Like Christian mystics, Jewish mystics believed that God could be directly experienced. The Kabbalah is a system of intellectual mysticism that explores the relationship between God and the world. Only married males over the age of 40 were allowed to study the Kabbalah, because the secrets it contained could drive one mad. In the 18th century, a more devotional form of mystical Judaism emerged in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov (Lord of the Good Name), a Ukranian rabbi who used folk tales, song and dance to celebrate ecstatic love for God. These two forms of mysticism continue to inspire Jews and non-Jews today.

There are six main forms of modern Judaism. Orthodox Jews believe that the commands of the Torah are eternal, and they try to keep every one. They segregate men and women to opposite sides of the synagogue (because of purity laws). Their services are in Hebrew. Men keep their heads covered at all times (either with a hat or a “skull cap” - a yamulke) to show that God is always above them.

Reform Judaism, on the other hand, has made many adaptations to ancient practices, holding that some are not necessary, or even desirable, in today’s world. Their liturgies are largely in the vernacular, they do not segregate the sexes at services, and they ordain women rabbis.

Conservative Jews believe, with Reform, that many practices are not necessary today. However, they feel that Reform Judaism has gone too far in adapting to the modern age. They keep most of the ancient laws, but make adaptations for certain ones (e.g., travel on the Sabbath). They have, in recent years, begun to ordain women rabbis.

Hasidic Judaism is sometimes called “ultra-orthodox.” Their followers dress completely in black, tend to live in their own communities, and practice a type of Jewish devotional mysticism that goes back to the Baal Shem Tov. Their worship is joyous, often incorporating singing and dancing.

Reconstruction Judaism is a 20th century movement that believes that change is an essential part of the Jewish Tradition. However, they feel that Reform is too individualistic, and so they emphasize the importance of community. Jewish Renewal is an

attempt to bring the mysticism of Hasidism into the modern age. They draw deeply from the mystical teachings, seeking union with God, but are also informed by modern science, and are open to modern movements like feminism, and so forth.

Judaism, our older sister, is alive and well, and continuing, like their ancestor Jacob, to wrestle with the Divine. And like any older sister, she has a lot to teach her younger siblings.

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