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Chapter 11

“Reciprocal Illumination”

A Quasi-Midrashic Orientation for Inter-Theological Inquiry

1 Introduction

Among the perturbing issues in the study of a tradition's continuity is the matter of interfaith relations generally and inter-*theological* study more particularly. That is, the study of *theos*, *cosmos*, *anthros*, and their relations. What do our traditions tell us about these? The historical evidence is mixed with, for instance, Maimonides drawing productively on the medieval Arabic Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābī, ibn Sinā, and ibn Bājja and with early modern Reformed Covenantal theologians drawing heavily on the Hebrew Bible and study with rabbis. On the other hand are centuries of forced disputations imposed on Jewish communities by anti-Judaistic Christian clerics and anti-Judaistic readings of the Hebrew Bible by highly trained, nineteenth-century exegetes such as Julius Wellhausen and Adolf von Harnack.

Each possibility, positive and prejudicial, relies on assumptions about its own and other traditions and on the approaches to interfaith study that follow from those assumptions. This chapter proposes an approach to inter-theological scholarship, “reciprocal illumination,” with the aim of furthering productive exchange characterized by curiosity, interest in new perspectives, and mutual respect for the differences among traditions. It will focus on Jewish-Christian exchange. Importantly, the chapter suggests that a wide range of inter-theological exchanges—from the ubiquitous, cultural adaptations of ideas from one tradition to another to more formal inter-theological study—fall within the continuity of Jewish tradition and experience since the amoraic period.

2 Antecedents of “Reciprocal Illumination” in the Jewish Experience

To begin, somewhat cheekily, with ubiquitous religio-cultural adaptation, one might think of the re-working of Egyptian YVH worship (fourteenth to twelfth

century BCE¹) into the Israelite tetragrammaton and theology (tenth century BCE). Or one may think of Daniel Boyarin's work² and the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*³ on early Christian re-interpretation of Jewish theology, texts, and practices—two of western civilization's most significant instances of inter-theological exchange. As noted by the many authors in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Jewish-Christian exchange was robust into the beginning of the medieval period.⁴ One cannot read the gemara without recognizing the influences of Persian, Hellenistic, Christian, and neo-Platonist thought. *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century* tells a similarly complex story of the high Middle Ages.⁵

In describing this sort of ubiquitous cultural exchange—at times explicit, at times indirect, and at times unacknowledged—Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg use the term co-production. “Not only at their origins,” they write, “but at every instant of their existence, including present and future, many and varied Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities are forming, re-forming, and transforming themselves by interacting with, thinking about, and imagining each other” at times irenically and at times conflictually.⁶ Heyden and Nirenberg unpack one example in which, to argue for the importance of its ideas, a Qur’anic passage co-produces itself with the Talmud tractate *b. Shabbat* 88a (on the Sinai narrative), which itself was a co-production with (and against) the Pauline view that Judaism enslaves one to the law while Christianity allows for freedom.⁷ Galit Hasan-Rokem similarly investigates the “intertextuality of Leviticus Rabbah with New Testament texts” by looking at co-appearing stories of women in exchange

1 James Dunn and John William Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3.

2 Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2013).

3 Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4 Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); see also Israel Yaakov Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

5 Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler, eds., *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

6 Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg, “Co-Produced Religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” *Harvard Theological Review* 118/1 (2025): 159-180, quote from 160-161.

7 *Ibid.*, 163-164.

with religious authorities.⁸ In these and other examples, faith traditions differ from and rework each other as they articulate their own positions.

In the modern era, Jewish interest in inter-theological inquiry has been more explicit even with the wariness of a historically oppressive Christianity. Nineteenth-century scholars such as Henrich Graetz, Samuel Hirsch, and Abraham Geiger in Germany, Claude Montefiore in the UK, and in the US with Felix Adler, Emil Hirsch, Kaufmann Kohler, and Isaac Mayer Wise were in part seeking to integrate Jewish communities into the surrounding societies and in part inaugurating serious engagement among modern philosophy, Jesus’ moral vision, and modern Judaism. Geiger and his contemporary Samuel Hirsch (*Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, *The Religious Philosophy of the Jews*), for instance, understood Judaism’s global dispersal through Hegel’s notion of Spirit working through world history. Geiger writes, Judaism “was itself to journey into the world with all its members according to the entire form of life which it had taken. The call of the spirit directing history went out to Judaism.”⁹ Monotheism and the moral code are the universal aspect of Judaism, which is tasked with bringing these universals to the world in engagement with it.

Geiger understood Christianity and Islam as heirs to this universal aspect. More unusually, Sigismund Stern held that, to engage others about these universal verities, Judaism should become a Jewish church—not in the sense of adopting Christian doctrine but in the sense of becoming an official corporate body with certain civil powers to contribute to society overall. “Judaism, therefore, must create its own church within which its own life can take shape and enter into the lives of states and nations that are the carriers of the present development. It must exit the fragmentation of its present existence and shape itself into a coherent, living and organic whole.”¹⁰ To be clear about what he means by “enter into the lives of states and nations,” Stern continues:

“there is no law for us that could prevent us from living and acting in the most intimate communion with our Christian brothers, no doctrine that might make us think of the work of those who profess a different faith as lesser than our own, no rule that demands of us to seclude or separate ourselves from the members of other religions (. . .). *Judaism should not just permit its adherents this activity but demand it as a religious duty.*”¹¹

⁸ Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Building the Gate, or Neighbors Make Good Fences,” in *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 55–85.

⁹ Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Its History* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1911), 212.

¹⁰ Samuel Kessler and George Kohler, *Modern Jewish Theology: The First One Hundred Years, 1835–1935* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2023), 130, 131.

¹¹ Kessler and Kohler, *Modern Jewish Theology*, 135–136, emphasis mine.

In the US, the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform put it this way: “We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation, held sacred in any religious system, the conscious indwelling of God in man.”¹² With this understanding of God working through all religions, the platform continues, “Christianity and Islam being daughter religions of Judaism, we appreciate their providential mission to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth . . . we *extend the hand of fellowship* to all who cooperate with us in the *establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness* among men.”¹³ Advancing the point at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Cincinnati, Emil Hirsch identified Judaism as one of the “three great religions” and declared that “race and nationality can not circumscribe the fellowship of the larger communion of the faithful, a communion destined to embrace in one covenant all the children of men.”¹⁴ Hirsch then links “the fellowship of the larger communion of the faithful” to the long tradition of Judaism since the rabbis: “The church universal must have the Pentecostal gift of the many flaming tongues in it, as the rabbis say was the case at Sinai”¹⁵ Infused by Judaism as by other religions, this communion “will then as now lift man above his weaknesses by reminding him of his responsibilities. The goal before us is Paradise.”¹⁶

These nineteenth-century efforts evince a Judaism drawing on its distinct resources in exchange, in “dialectic,” or in “entanglement” with its milieu, as Judaism has done throughout history. Scholarly works on these efforts include those by Paul Mendes-Flohr, Ruth HaCohen, Moshe Idel, and David Ruderman.¹⁷ Amir

12 Michael Meyer, and W. Gunther Plaut, eds., *The Reform Judaism Reader: Insights from the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 198.

13 Ibid., 199, emphasis mine.

14 Emil G. Hirsch, "Elements of Universal Religion," in *Judaism at the World's Parliament of Religions* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1894), 386–390, quote from 386–387.

15 Indeed, the rabbis permit most prayers to be said in many languages (except Aramaic)-even those rabbis who prefer that certain prayers be said in Hebrew, see for instance, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Berachot* 1:6.

ובכל הברכות קלן נאמריו בכל לשון והוא שיאמר כעיו שתקנו חקמים. ואם שנה את המטבע האיל והזכיר אפורה ומלכות וענן הברכה אפלו בלשון חל יצא:

“All the blessings may be recited in any language, provided one recites [a translation of] the text ordained by the Sages. [A person who] changes that text fulfills his obligation nonetheless - since he mentioned God’s name, His sovereignty, and the subject of the blessing - although he did so in an ordinary language.”

16 Hirsch, "Elements of Universal Religion," 388.

17 Ruth HaCohen, "Between Noise and Harmony: The Oratorical Moment in the Musical Entanglements of Jews and Christians," *Critical Inquiry* 32/2 (2006): 250–277; Moshe Idel, "Transfers of Categories: The German-Jewish Experience and Beyond" in *The German-Jewish Experience Revis-*

Engel writes that, while drawing on their respective resources, traditions productively “spill over the boundaries set by institutions to create more complex, less restricted worldviews.”¹⁸ This is a story not of siloed development but rather of distinct traditions in complex relation, give-and-take, and often co-constitution. In his study of such thinkers as Gershom Scholem, Ernst Mueller, Martin Buber, and Meir Wiener, Engel finds that their exploration of Kabbalah and Hasidism:

“(. . .) created a basis for thinking about a combined Jewish and Christian religiosity. They did so *knowingly*, using well-established cultural forms for their purposes. Judaism, Christianity, and German-language culture did not just influence each other; they also, at times, merged into greater, more complicated, and more capacious worldviews, encompassing elements from all three.”¹⁹

In his analysis, Engel describes the enrichment of traditions in exploration with others while Heyden and Nirenberg describe several oppositional encounters. However, in all, the exchange is inextricable from the evolution of Jewish thought and its methodology, if you will, and it has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The English translation of Joseph Klausner’s *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (first written in Hebrew) was published in 1925,²⁰ Samuel Sandmel’s *We Jews and Jesus: Exploring Theological Differences for Mutual Understanding*, in 1965.²¹ Stephen Wise, Susannah Heschel, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, and edited volumes such as *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*²² and *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* have all furthered this exploration. We may add the work of Byron Sherwin, Shaul Magid, Daniel Matt, Irving Greenberg, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi on the Jewish messianism of Jesus and on “the use

ited, eds., Steven E. Aschheim and Vivian Liska (Berlin: De Gruyter/Brill, 2015), 15–44; Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010).

¹⁸ Amir Engel, “Jewish–Christian Religiosity: A Study in Twentieth-Century Central European History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 20 (2023): 764–784, quote from 766.

¹⁹ Ibid, 767, emphasis mine.

²⁰ Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

²¹ Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus: Exploring Theological Differences for Mutual Understanding* (Woodstock, Skylight VT: SkyLight Paths, 2006).

²² Beatrice Bruteau, ed., *Jesus through Jewish Eyes: Rabbis and Scholars Engage an Ancient Brother in a New Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

and adaptation of the Jewish mystical tradition as a template for the Jewish Jesus.”²³ Martin Buber called Jesus “a great brother.”²⁴

Organizations like the Council on Centers of Jewish-Christian Relations have documented Jewish-Christian dialogue and collaboration since the end of the Second World War.²⁵ The Vatican’s 1965 *Nostra Aetate* was critical in fostering this dialogue, stating:

“Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues (. . .) what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today (. . .). Furthermore, in the rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews (. . .) decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”²⁶

The Dabru Emet response, signed by over 220 rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism and published in *The New York Times* in 2000, furthered the possibility of interfaith dialogue in noting eight areas of commonality among Jews and Christians: (i) Jews and Christians worship the same God, (ii) Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book, (iii) Christians can respect the claim of the Jews on the land of Israel, (iv) Jews and Christians together accept the moral principles of the Pentateuch, (v) Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon, (vi) The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture . . . Neither Jew nor Christian should be pressed into affirming the teaching of the other community, (vii) A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not

²³ Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 148; see also, Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004); Daniel Matt, “Yeshua the Hasid,” in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 74–80; Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Arthur Green, “Thinking through the Metaphors of Deep Ecumenicism: A Dialogue,” *Spectrum* 3/2 (Summer/Fall 2007); Byron Sherwin, “Who Do You Say That I Am (Mark 8:29): A New Jewish View of Jesus,” in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 31–44.

²⁴ Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

²⁵ Council on Centers of Jewish-Christian Relations (1945–2020), <https://ccjr.us/> [Accessed: 31.08.2025].

²⁶ The Holy See, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christians Religions, *Nostra Aetate*,” 28.10.1965 https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

weaken Jewish practice, (viii) Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.²⁷

Among the many Protestant contributions to interfaith and inter-theological collaboration is *A Response to Dabru Emet* (2003), by the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (Lutherische Europäische Kommission Kirche und Judentum, LEKKJ) an umbrella organization of twenty-five European Lutheran church bodies:

“In its Driebergen Declaration (1991), the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (. . .) rejected the traditional Christian “teaching of contempt” towards Jews and Judaism, and in particular, the anti-Jewish writings of Martin Luther, and it called for the reformation of church practice in the light of these insights. Against this background, LEKKJ welcomes the issuance of *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*. We see in this statement a confirmation of our own work of these past years (. . .). We know that we must reexamine themes in Lutheran theology that in the past have repeatedly given rise to enmity towards Jews (. . .). Fully aware that *Dabru Emet* is in the first instance an intra-Jewish invitation to conversation, we see in this statement also an aid to us in expressing and living out our faith in such a way that we do not denigrate Jews, but rather respect them in their otherness, and are enabled to give an account of our own identity more clearly as we scrutinize it in the light of how others see us.”²⁸

A 2015 assessment of *Nostra Aetate*’s outcomes, composed by the Anti-Defamation League, a non-profit that monitors and documents anti-Semitic incidents, further states that,

In the past 50 years, the Church has continued the process that began with *Nostra Aetate*. It has developed a sophisticated theology of Jews and Judaism expressed in documents like “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah” (1998) and “The Jewish People and the Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (2001). Another important moment was the Vatican’s recognition of the state of Israel and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993 (. . .).

The commitment of both Jews and Catholics to overcoming the past, and especially the warm personal relationships that have developed at the highest levels as well as locally, have made constructive engagement and honest exchange possible, even about difficult subjects. The relationship is strong enough that it has continued despite unresolved issues, such as the opening of the Vatican archives from the Second World War and the proposed canon-

²⁷ Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies, Baltimore, Maryland, “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*,” Council on Centers of Jewish-Christian Relations, 10.09.2000 <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/dabru-emet>.

²⁸ Council on Centers of Jewish-Christian Relations (1945-2020), “Section on European Protestantism,” 12.05.2003 <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/protestant-churches/eur/lekkj03may12>.

ization of Pius XII (. . .). The friendship of Pope Francis with Rabbi Abraham Skorka is itself one of the fruits of *Nostra Aetate* and a model for Jews and Catholics around the world.²⁹

One can hope for more in this direction. Yet less frequent to date is joint research where scholars from different traditions work together to explore theology, understandings of *theos*, *cosmos*, *anthropos*, and their relations. That is, for inter-theological work *done inter-religiously*. Also less frequent is work that explores a particular theological concept by drawing on ideas and texts from various traditions. Scholars such as Shaul Magid feel the need to call for such exploration precisely because it remains on the edges of theological inquiry and intermittent in endeavor.

3 A Challenge to Inter-Theological Inquiry

An important challenge to inter-theological inquiry is highlighted in a presentation by Konrad Schmid on the history of Hebrew Bible scholarship in Europe from the late nineteenth century to the present. Schmid looks at why—given the consistent focus on philology and on comparative mythology, religion, and legal codes—radically different accounts nonetheless emerged of the Hebrew Bible’s meaning and value. Schmid finds that the differences emerged not from technical scholarship but from historical and cultural factors, specifically the influence of rising anti-Semitism on the scientists of fin de siècle Europe. The prejudicial climate shaped their application of even scholarly tools to arrive at predictably negative judgments of the Hebrew Bible.

Self-reflexivity regarding the influence of culture on science is now part of the research playbook. Yet this self-reflexivity must also humbly assume that, at times, culture informs research in ways that are no more visible to today’s scientists than the influence of anti-Semitism was on those a century and more ago. This holds, Schmid notes, when one thinks one is positing a radical break with the methodologies of the past. The erudition of late nineteenth century scholars as accomplished as Wellhausen, Harnack, and others was cutting-edge. Yet, Schmid writes, in their investigations of the documentary hypothesis, their dating of the “P” source, and much else, “cultural, historical, social and religious factors

²⁹ Jonathan Greenblatt, “How *Nostra Aetate* Transformed Catholic-Jewish Relations,” The Jewish Anti-Defamation League, 27.10.2015
<https://www.adl.org/resources/news/how-nostra-aetate-transformed-catholic-jewish-relations#:~:text=In%20its%20fourth%20chapter%2C%20Nostra%20Aetate%20effectively,rejected%20by%20God%20and%20their%20covenant%20revoked.>

influence the current analysis and interpretation of historical literary documents."³⁰

There is always much to which state-of-the-art science is blind in part because, as Donald Rumsfeld, George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, famously said, there are knowns, there are known unknowns, and there are unknown unknowns.³¹ In the last case, one doesn't know that there are extant somethings out there yet to be known. One doesn't recognize, for instance, that a theological or sociological assumption is coloring hypothesis-making, data collection, or interpretation. One doesn't know that the assumption exists and so one cannot grapple with it.

This unavoidable blind spot might sound like a call for research protocols that guard against bias. In part it is, as such protocols are essential in limiting the influence of cultural assumptions on research. Yet much bias and assumption-influence occur upstream of protocols, in the background *Denkstil*³² that is always already in place as protocols are established. One may think of the now classic example of birth control research that had excellent protocols but which assumed the female body as its object. The idea of tampering with the male body and virility did not for many decades come onto the screen of fertility science. Research protocols work against the corruption of discovery by unconscious assumption but do not always address the cases where one cannot pre-empt what one cannot see. One cannot guard against unknown unknowns.

Yet limiting such corruption of method is of prime importance to research overall and to the sensitive arena of doing inter-theological research inter-religiously. This chapter looks at a few considerations not only for keeping our individual work honest but specifically for this sort of inquiry. In *American Post-Judaism*, Shaul Magid seeks a post-exclusionary metaphysics, where religious/faith traditions, most specifically Christianity and Judaism, do not respectfully tolerate each other but explore and work with each other's concepts. He describes a

30 Konrad Schmid, "The Exegesis of the Pentateuch between Judaism and Christianity: From Julius Wellhausen to Baruch Schwartz and Beyond," *Transformation of Traditions through Interreligious Encounters: Inaugural Conference of the Berlin Interdisciplinary Center "Traditions in Transformation,"* (Berlin, Humboldt-University, June 23–25, 2024).

31 Donald Rumsfeld, "DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," US Department of Defense, 12.02.2002 <https://web.archive.org/web/20160406235718/http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636> [Accessed: 31.08.2025].

32 Ludwik Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache: Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv* (Berlin: Surkamp, 1935); Ludwik Fleck, *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact: An Introduction to the Theory of Thought Style and Thought Collective*, trans. Fred Bradley, Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

“transition from pluralism (as merely tolerance) to multiculturalism, combined with the normalization of hybridity in which diversity is celebrated and not simply tolerated, and constructed ethnic identities are considered normative.”³³

What follows is a look at an approach or orientation for such post-boundaried, inter-theological exploration that may offer guardrails against the always-already occupation of research protocols by “upstream” religio-cultural assumptions.

4 Human Relationality as Distinction-amid-Relation: A Research Project

Several years ago, I had an opportunity to work on an inter-theological project on relationality, drawing from Christian and Jewish traditions—a challenging task owing to the historical terrain. Even if one does not accede to Richard Rubenstein’s Christian determinism and its unavoidable anti-Judaistic outworkings,³⁴ the empirical record predicts an uphill climb.

The central topic of inquiry was the role of relationality in human nature. Of what does it consist; is it foundational or does it develop, and if it develops, under what conditions? Is human relationality robust, fragile, in conflict with other aspects of human nature? Among whom are the relevant relations and are they mutually supportive or in tension?

The understanding of relationality developed in this project works from the idea of distinction-amid-relation.³⁵ That is, there could be nothing, but there’s something. No “something” can cause itself into existence, and since things exist, there thus must be a ground for their presence. That ground is what some people call God. Franz Rosenzweig called it “the eventfulness of the limitless possibilities that will come to exist, the not-nothing that is the ‘divine essence in all infinity’ prior to there being a distinct something or a distinct nothing.”³⁶ After the kabbal-

³³ Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 22.

³⁴ In brief summary: Rubenstein describes what he believes is the enduring Christian view of Judaism: (i) God established a special covenantal relationship with the Israelites, who (ii) tragically and wrongly rejected God’s new covenant in Jesus and who instead (iii) killed the incarnate God, and so (iv) they are deserving of God’s punishment, see, Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), part I, chs. 1, 2, notably 11–12, 13, 24.

³⁵ Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 37.

³⁶ Cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 79.

ist principle of Eyn Sof, this ground is not so much what precedes effects as what is realized as it yields effects. Existence is God’s self-expression. In the poetic words of Genesis: God breathed *nishmat cha’im* (the spirit of life) into Adam and so into all persons (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים Gen. 2:7)

On one hand, each existing particular is radically different from the transcendent God—differences in materiality/immateriality, finitude/infinity, etc. Yet on the other, each particular is of this source in order to exist. Poetically, this is expressed in the imago/*b’tselem Elohim*. Persons are radically different from the incorporeal, imageless God; there is no divine physiognomy for humanity to be like. Yet nonetheless, in existing at all, we are of the divine *imageless* “image.” In Aquinas’s words, “in all things God works intimately.”³⁷ Martin Buber reprises, “God is the ‘wholly Other,’ but He is also wholly Same . . . He is also the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my ‘I.’”³⁸ God is that mysterious relation with another that is radically different yet so intimate that it is nearer to me than myself because it is the cause of myself.

In short, radical difference or distinction from the transcendent God *yet* foundational relation is the way anything comes to be. The structure of existence is distinction-amid-relation. We may say that relationship-among-different-beings is a technology for existence. As distinction-amid-relation is the structure of existing, persons are also distinct from each other yet in necessary relation. Each distinct person is who she is through the layers and networks of relations that form her. No infant develops alone. John Zizioulas writes, “The person cannot be conceived in itself as a static entity, but only as it *relates to* . . . [it is] in communion that this being is *itself* and thus *is at all*.”³⁹ Or in Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s elegant words, “Life begins as life together.”⁴⁰

This ontology or technology for existence is not a balance between distinction on one hand and relationship on the other. It is reciprocal constitution. Each unique person emerges through her relations, and in turn, those relations are constituted by her distinct influence. Existence is a case neither of univocity, the sameness of all particulars, as each is unique. Nor is it a case of equivocality, a difference among particulars so thorough that relation is impossible. Rather, exis-

37 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican English Province, vols. 1–5 (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1948; original 1265–1274), Ia, q. 105, art. 5.

38 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1958), 79.

39 John Zizioulas, “Human Capacity and Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975): 401–448, quote from 409.

40 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 43.

tence is metaxalogical, “being between,” allowing for differences within relationality and for relation that allows for difference.

In sum, the DNA of existence is a double helix of relations between each person and God *and* among persons. As there are no persons without these relations, there is no flourishing, no *summum bonum*, without caring for them. Relations may be proximate or through our paths of global connectedness, as our educational and economic opportunities, nutrition, health care, etc. are formed by those who are not necessarily nearby.

This brief sketch of distinction-amid-relation is not meant as a detailed investigation of ontology or ethics but rather as a description of the project through which an approach or orientation for inter-theological study emerged.

5 Reciprocal Illumination: A Quasi-Midrashic Approach to Inter-Theological Inquiry—or Continuing Jewish Epistemology

5.1 Preliminary Remarks

To move forward in the work on distinction-amid-relation, an approach was sought that builds on the cultural exchange, debate, “co-production,” and “entanglement” of long Jewish experience as these approaches themselves acknowledge ontological relationality. For if all extants are distinct amid relation, our ideation and research too are distinct amid relation. They are thought emerging in complex, mediated relation to other thought and life circumstances, including ideas from multiple faith traditions. While all ideas are in complex ways in relation, however extended, Judaism and Christianity are ideationally proximate as Boyarin, Klausner, Buber, Heyden and Nirenberg, S. Heschel among other have noted. Thus, the project sought to explore human relationality by drawing on these two traditions, distinct yet brought together to illuminate a common theme. This is not the Mendelssohnian idea that there exists, besides Judaism, a “universal religion,” with such tenets as the existence of an infinite, immaterial one God, creator, omniscient, omnipotent, and in communication with humanity.⁴¹ Nor is it Emil Hirsch’s exploration of a (universal) World Religion.⁴²

⁴¹ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 1983).

⁴² Hirsch, “Elements of Universal Religion,” 386–390.

Rather, the tenets of Judaism and Christianity *in their particularity* were brought to bear on the concept of relationality.

The approach that emerged was one of reciprocal illumination, where each tradition's ideas about *theos*, *cosmos*, *anthropos*, and their relations enrich the common topic of relationality without any tradition assimilating to another. Light comes from many quarters. This approach, it seemed, bears faint echoes to the methodology of midrash, rabbinic explication of a source text by drawing on several other scriptural texts or proof texts. This is yet another way in which this project follows Jewish tradition and epistemology. Proof texts do not necessarily remark directly on each other but rather help interpret the source passage. Light on the source text comes from many proof text quarters. “The idiom and idea of this verse,” Judah Goldin explains, “are made concrete and are illuminated by a number of verses in other parts of Scripture.”⁴³ Proof texts achieve their impact by a number of means. One is accumulation, where each proof text alone is of modest interest but together, they create a substantial point. Listing the divine wonders of the exodus from Egypt would be one example. Another midrashic method is juxtaposition, where bringing together proof texts with opposing views moves the understanding of the source text to a more nuanced level.

Reciprocal illumination is not classic midrash, so one may informally and somewhat tongue-in-cheek call it quasi-midrashic. A key difference is that midrash may accumulate proof texts into a new, independent text that interprets the source. Boyarin writes, “The verses of the Bible function for the rabbis much as do words in ordinary speech. They are a repertoire of semiotic elements that can be recombined into new discourse, just as words are recombined constantly into new discourse . . . the fundamental moment of all of these midrashic forms is precisely the very co-citation of several verses.”⁴⁴ In reciprocal illumination, the ideas, narratives, imagery, etc. from each tradition are not semiotic units to be combined as words are combined into sentences. Rather, they remain distinct and intact, situated in their traditions and illuminating relationality from their respective perches.

A second way in which reciprocal illumination differs from classic midrash is that midrash allows itself to attribute to proof texts meaning that was not in the original context. Reciprocal illumination does not. To explicate the source text, midrash may change the punctuation or simply omit words of a proof text to

⁴³ Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 124.

⁴⁴ Daniel Boyarin, “Reciting the Torah: The Function of Quotation in the Midrash,” in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 22–28, quote at 28, 29.

achieve the intended interpretation of the source passage.⁴⁵ Boyarin understands these and other midrashic techniques as a tool kit with which to keep Jewish thought and texts relevant under the drastically new circumstances after the destruction of the Second Temple. He writes,

“The rabbis, faced with the disruption of their times . . . and with the necessity of appropriating Scripture for their times, found in the creation of an explicitly and pervasively inter-textual literature the ideal generative and reconstructive tool, which preserved the privileged position of the biblical text by releasing it from its position of immobilized totality.”⁴⁶

However helpful to premodern Jewish exegetes, this technique is not in the tool kit of reciprocal illumination, where the source text meaning remains intact.

In this project, false starts and unproductive rabbit holes were many. Below is a brief summary of the upstream orientation or ways of thinking that we found allowed for Jewish-Christian reciprocal illumination of the concept of human relationality.

5.2 The Heterogeneity of Experience

The German-Jewish philosopher Joseph Soloveitchik notes that all particulars are iterations of the possible. As these particulars are plural and varied, each person experiences different ones and so has a different “version” of the world. As each person’s account of world differs from others, the condition of human inquiry is one of “teleological heterogeneity” and “pluralism.” Such heterogeneity, Soloveitchik writes, is “founded on reality itself.”⁴⁷ Paul Ricœur echoes in his theory of language. The plurality of languages and the need for explanation even among users of a common language evince, for Ricœur, our plural and varied understandings of world.⁴⁸ Honing in specifically on religious heterogeneity, John Thatamanil notes that diversity and multiplicity are present not only among religions but within them.

⁴⁵ In Sifre Numbers 42, for example, Judges 6:24 is cited in support of the idea that *God’s name* is peace, a meaning achieved by changing the punctuation from the original, where it is an *altar* that is named God-peace. More dramatically, the same Sifre midrash quotes Isaiah 45:7 to say that God is one “Who creates light and forms darkness and makes peace,”—a meaning achieved by excising from the Isaiah the words “I [God] make peace *and create woe*.”

⁴⁶ Boyarin, “Reciting the Torah,” 38; see also, Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, “The Orality of Rabbinic Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38–57, especially 44–45.

⁴⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 16.

⁴⁸ Paul Ricœur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006).

“No religion,” Thatamanil writes, “is a monolith but is instead a terrain marked by robust internal contestation (. . .). Religious traditions are communities of argumentation, arguments that, in some cases, have lasted for more than two millennia.”⁴⁹

The heterogeneity of experience is an assumption of the natural sciences as well. When Niels Bohr observed discontinuities in matter and energy—i.e., quantum packets rather than continuous streams of matter/energy—he understood that his observation was in fact not observable. He was working not from empirical evidence but from traces of the unperceivable within what he perceived. As what actually exists cannot be directly detected, physics relies on multiple accounts of the traces. In short, on heterogeneity of experience and interpretation. This, Bohr wrote, is the sort of effort that thinkers in religious traditions make. They try to get at what cannot be seen or “proved”—the existence of God, for instance—from what can be perceived and understood in the natural world. “A whole new background,” Bohr wrote, “for the relationship between scientific research and religious attitude has been created by the modern development of physics (. . .) it will be attempted to show the development in our time has forced us [scientists] to look into epistemological problems of a kind which recalls the common problems of the religions.”⁵⁰

The understanding of experience as heterogeneous brings us to the second aspect of our orientation for inter-theological study.

5.3 Epistemological Humility

Given the multiplicity of experience and teleological heterogeneity, all arenas of human knowledge are limited. Truth may be truth, but the human episteme is limited and incomplete. Thus, in addition to experiential variation, epistemological humility is an unavoidable condition of reciprocal illumination, recognition both of one’s limited access to truth and of the access that others have.

Incompletion is not free-fall relativism. On one hand, not knowing all truth does not mean that no aspects of truth are known or knowable, or that all ideas have equal claims to truth. Investigations are subject to the highest standards of repeatability, validity, reliability, and error correction. On the other hand, science does in fact err, however rigorous the effort at accuracy. Eighteenth century sci-

⁴⁹ John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 76.

⁵⁰ Notes dated August 26 and 27, 1953; MSS: 20 in the Niels Bohr Archive, cited in John Honner, “Unity-in-Difference: Karl Rahner and Niels Bohr,” *Theological Studies* 46/3 (1985): 480–506, quote from 499.

entists were confident in their belief that combustion was caused by the release of phlogiston, ostensibly a chemical contained in all substances—until Antoine Lavoisier debunked the idea and demonstrated the role of oxygen in combustion.⁵¹

In short, appreciation of epistemological limitation is necessary in the physical sciences even with their empirical measurability, probability calculations, and traces. It is a requirement perhaps more so in endeavors that raise, again Bohr, the “epistemological problems of a kind which recalls the common problems of the religions.”⁵² As Glen Stassen writes, “nor am I arguing for only one tradition as having all truth; all traditions need continuous correction.”⁵³ Colin Gunton similarly notes, if in being human Jesus was fallible, churches run by human beings cannot be otherwise.⁵⁴ And it is a premise and structure of Jewish study since the rabbinic period that one inches towards knowledge through debate, considering minor and dissenting views, with decisions understood to be provisional to the next level of argument. This is both a principle and the history of the production of Jewish thought. As David Kraemer explains, interpretation of tradition and sacred texts “was (and remains) a profoundly human activity (. . .). Humans are, by definition, imperfect; it is this that distinguishes them from God. Human interpretations must also, therefore, be imperfect, and even, on frequent occasions perhaps, wrong.”⁵⁵ Thus, the third feature of our orientation for inter-theological scholarship is:

5.4 Appreciation of Studying Broadly

That is, it is not only interesting to read in other traditions; it is necessary for a solid grasp of any phenomenon and for critical reflection on one’s own interpretive framework. Thinkers from different faith traditions may begin from various

51 Anton Lavoisier, *Traité élémentaire de chimie* (Paris: Chez Cuchet, 1789); see also, Anton Lavoisier, *Elements of Chemistry*, a facsimile reprint of the original 1790 English translation by Robert Kerr (Garden City: Dover Publishing, 1984).

52 Notes dated August 26 and 27, 1953; MSS: 20 in the Niels Bohr Archive, cited in Honner, “Unity-in-Difference,” 499.

53 Glen Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 14; see also, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 101.

54 Colin Gunton, “The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community,” in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, eds. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel Hardy (London: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 48–80, quote from 61.

55 David Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 121.

starting points and genealogies. Their work may not map onto each other. They will surely display aporia and may not be "in conversation." Yet the benefit of deep engagement with various traditions is great. "It is of the essence of what we mean when we speak of something as being biblical in character," Yoram Hazony writes, "that it presents its truth by means of a diversity of views."⁵⁶ Or as Richard Kearney puts it, "If divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism."⁵⁷ The Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan makes this point in *Method in Theology*,⁵⁸ as does his interpreter Robert Doran: "Anyone engaging in direct theological discourse must always be engaged as well in a continual *ressourcement*," involving critique within the faith community and exchange with those outside it. "The church itself," Doran continues, "in its concrete practice will always stand under the judgment both from within and from without of women and men of intellectual, moral, religious, and affective integrity."⁵⁹

This holds not only for Doran's theology but for Wellhausen's biblical exegesis. Terence Fretheim suggests that the "advances and regressions" of sacred texts, including philological and narrative inconsistencies, "are a plus and are revealing of a complex understanding of the development of law within the canonical shape of things."⁶⁰ Understanding the circumstances that brought about these textual inconsistencies requires Doran's "continual *ressourcement*" within and across disciplines and traditions. As Thatamanil writes, "any pluralism that imagines religious traditions flourishing (or even existing) apart from mutual encounter and transformation is mistaken because it indulges in ahistorical fiction. Our traditions have always needed each other and always will."⁶¹

⁵⁶ Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 227.

⁵⁷ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), Preface. Writing even about orthodoxy, Graham Ward notes that our knowledge of world and God comes from our texts of revelation understood on "the basis of faith." Faith "is a courageous groping towards promises in Christ that may or may not have been understood." It is "an endless formulation and reformulation," an "ongoing set of interrelated activities," and a "process" completed "only when time and creation itself come to their completion . . . When it stops being a process of discernment and it starts being an ideology then orthodoxy is reified; and reification is always possible and, when it occurs, always dangerous." Graham Ward, "Receiving the Gift," *Modern Theology* 30/3 (2014): 84.

⁵⁸ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 267.

⁵⁹ Robert M. Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 198–199.

⁶⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 152.

⁶¹ Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 65.

In sum, exegetical and theological ideas evolve with continued, broad exploration. The effort makes them not less reliable but more so as they are pondered and tested over centuries by people in varying circumstances, as they confront the best and worst of human conduct, and as they take into account accumulated and new knowledge. The accumulation, critique, and comparison across multiple sources is how humanity gets at what there is. The benefit of studying varied traditions emerges from the heterogeneity of experience, epistemological humility, and from the fourth feature of our orientation:

5.5 The Simultaneity of Theological Validity or Suspension of Imposing Judgment

There is less to be learned from studying with the *a priori* intention of refuting unfamiliar ideas than from studying with an openness to them. Refutation was the purpose of medieval, church-mandated disputations between rabbis and Christian theologians, where church officials unsurprisingly judged Christian theologians to be the “winners” and little was learned by anyone. To engage in productive inter-theological study, not only is interest in various notions of *theos*, *cosmos*, and *anthropos* important (see, above) but also a suspension of imposing judgment in favor of one notion or the other.

That is, believing one set of ideas to be true does not exempt those ideas from illumination by other traditions. True ideas may also be illuminated by many sources. Further, the suspension of imposed judgment moves beyond tolerance, when faith traditions remain distant but mostly disinterested, and allows for the co-development and co-elaboration of concepts. Irving Greenberg argues that it is ironically an outworking of the Holocaust that Jewish and Christian thinkers reach beyond tolerance to engage each other’s theological tenets: “After the Holocaust, a model of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity ideally should enable one to affirm the fullness of the faith-claims of the other, not just offer tolerance.”⁶² Moreover, inter-theological study—believing one tradition to be true while studying others—does not void or alter the claims of either tradition. Multiple ideas may be on the screen at the same time, so to speak, revealing repetition or reappearance, affinity, contrast, aporia, etc.

Importantly, while affinities do not erase differences, differences need not be erased for affinities to remain noteworthy. David Bentley Hart notes, “It may be that one faith is truer than any other, or contains that ultimate truth to which all

⁶² Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, 146.

faiths aspire in their various ways; but that still would hardly reduce all other religions to mere falsehood.”⁶³ The illumination of true ideas by a variety of sources, the suspension of imposed judgment, and the possibility of simultaneous validity imply a fifth and final feature of reciprocal illumination:

5.6 A Bracketing of Syncretism

Wide-ranging study does not require that faith traditions (or personal beliefs) assimilate into something syncretic with other traditions. Some contemporary thinkers are indeed interested in this sort of syncretic exploration. In Jewish thought, that would include Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Daniel Matt, Magid, and others, who are exploring the inclusion of Jesus in a kabbalist-hasidic pietism, for instance. Magid writes, “The kind of overt syncretistic experimentation, here represented in a Jewish Christology from a ‘kabbalistic-hasidic’ perspective steps outside the normative boundaries of inherited Judaism.”⁶⁴ Yet this fertile terrain is only one approach to inter-theological work. Much co-plumbing occurs with syncretism bracketed. Ephraim Meir, in his work on “Interreligious or dialogical theology,” writes that this sort of inquiry does not assimilate or combine traditions but rather:

“(. . .) creates bridges. Interreligious theology is the intellectual account of interreligious and intercultural meetings and discusses a multiplicity of aspects in “trans-difference.” The uniqueness of one’s religion does not prevent the lofty possibility of communication. If I am not opening myself up to the other’s understanding of the Ultimate, I may miss an aspect of religiosity that is relevant to my own religious life . . . To be in interreligious dialogue is first of all to be there for the other in non-indifference.”⁶⁵

Inter-theological work that exemplifies this five-part orientation includes Wonhee Anne Joh’s “Christology of *Jeong*,”⁶⁶ which looks at tenets and practices from both the Christian and Korean traditions. Raymond Aldred looks at the Christian Trinity alongside the American aboriginal people’s trinity of land, people, and spirit. “Consider,” Aldred writes, “that the primary categories of relationships for

⁶³ David B. Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

⁶⁴ Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 156.

⁶⁵ Ephraim Meir, “Levinas’s Approach to the Other in Its Relevance for Interreligious Theology,” lecture at Humboldt University, Theological Faculty, 09.07.2015; see also, Ephraim Meir, *Interreligious Theology: Its Value and Mooring in Modern Jewish Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

⁶⁶ Wonhee Anne Joh, *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 20–26; ch. 5.

the First Peoples of North America include relationship with land or creation, relationship with people, individuals and other groups, and the relationship with the spiritual.”⁶⁷ Vajrayana Buddhism too posits a trinity of sorts in its idea of the specific self, one’s eternal spirit, and one’s bonds to others and nature.⁶⁸ None of these inter-theological explorations assimilates traditions to each other or creates a syncretic third. Rather, ideas are explored with their differences and affinities for enrichment of each other or of a common theme.

6 John Thatamanil’s Methodology for a “Theology of Religious Diversity”

In his book *Circling the Elephant*, Thatamanil develops a companion methodology for a “theology of religious diversity” (TRD).⁶⁹ As with our process of reciprocal illumination, he sought a set of commitments upstream of research protocols themselves. He asks: how do we need to think in order to draw from more than one wisdom tradition? His four criteria are:

- (i) Difference without incommensurability, where “traditions are different enough that we have something new to learn from them, but not so different as to be incommensurable.”⁷⁰ Echoing the premise of distinction-amid-relation, Thatamanil suggests that faith traditions offer their singular wisdom in ways that bear on our common condition. Faith traditions are themselves distinct amid relation, and one may learn from more than one tradition, its beliefs and practices. Thus:
- (ii) One has something to learn from traditions other than one’s own without trying to “solve” those traditions, to make them into something more compatible with one’s “home” belief. This is Thatamanil’s echo to epistemological humility and bracketing imposed judgment. He describes “a theory of religious diversity that welcomes the hospitable reception of wisdom and the ongoing mutual transformation of traditions. If a TRD offers reasons for and commends interreligious learning, then other traditions may become more than

⁶⁷ Raymond C. Aldred, “Freedom,” in *Prophetic Evangelicals: Envisioning a Just and Peaceable Kingdom*, eds. Bruce E. Benson, Malinda E. Berry and Peter Heltzel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 150–167; 152–153.

⁶⁸ Vajrayana Buddhism contrasts with the more monastic Buddhist traditions, in which one may disengage from worldly attachments and a focus on life on earth.

⁶⁹ Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 67–68.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

stubborn facts to which I must be reluctantly reconciled or soteriological problems I must resolve.”⁷¹ For Thatamanil, this implies that:

- (iii) We are “intrinsically” interested in other traditions because:
- (iv) At least some aspects of their beliefs we recognize as having merit—echoing simultaneity of interest or validity, above. “The question is not just, ‘Can the Buddhist help me be a better Christian?’ but instead, ‘Can I desire to know what Buddhists know as they come to know it?’”⁷² without trying to change it or to change Christianity.

7 Wellhausen Reprised

Wellhausen and his colleagues conducted precise, philological analyses of the Hebrew Bible and from this brilliant, exacting methodology concluded, as Schmid and others have noted, that Judaism was an exacting, legalistic faith. This is the pathetic fallacy with an exclamation point. Had they been working from the reciprocal illumination discussed above, they might have been curious as to how other interpreters understood the Bible and about the life forms that emerge from those interpretations. They might have studied with Catholic and Islamic scholars or with Jewish ones in Berlin’s Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (founded in 1870), in the Breslau “Jüdisch-theologisches Seminar” (1854-1938), in the “Rabbinerseminar” (Budapest, founded 1877), or in the “Israelitisch-Theologische Lehranstalt” in Vienna (1893-1938). Or they might have consulted more traditional rabbinic circles, which would have opened up a rich interpretive world that had supported Jewish communities, philosophical investigation, and ways of life for millennia.

Such consultation might have suggested that Jewish interpretive traditions, from the rabbinic through the modern era, have merit both in themselves and as illumination for Wellhausen’s own research. That is, for his understanding: of Jewish-Christian difference without incommensurability; of the multiplicity of experience and interpretation; of possible reciprocal illumination without assimilation or syncretism; of possible joint illumination of a common theme; and of epistemological humility. In a non-sectarian example of reciprocal illumination in the country where Wellhausen spent his career, since 2007 Rabbi Professor Dr. Tsvi Blanchard has taught Jewish law not in a Jewish or Religious Studies Department but in the Law Faculty at Humboldt University. The point is not to have German

⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

⁷² Ibid., 68–69.

law adopt Talmudic statutes but rather mutual enrichment: how can the premises and methods of rabbinic and modern law illuminate each other and the cultural assumptions, norms, and values in which they are situated?

Wellhausen et al. did not engage in such study because, as noted in the Schmid presentation discussed above, they thought Judaism primitive. That is, it was not part of their scholarly orientation to see that their rejection of Jewish perspectives *allowed* them to think Judaism primitive.

Wellhausen's error was the sort that David Burrell describes in his long study of cross-fertilization in the Abrahamic traditions. Burrell notes that studying a variety of traditions allows one to identify flaws in one's own—if not in their ideals, then in their humanly imperfect or self-interested iterations. Burrell writes, "the presence of other believers can help the faithful in each tradition to gain insight into the distortions of that tradition: the ways it has compromised with the seductions of state power, or ways in which fixation on a particular other effectively skewed their understanding of the revelation given them."⁷³ Wellhausen's anti-Judaism is a case in point.

That it did not occur to Wellhausen et al. to study the Hebrew Bible from perspectives other than their own was an error not entirely of their own making. As Shulamit Volkov notes, both the low-level uneasiness about Jews as well as overt anti-Semitism—aggravated by the destabilization and new urban poverty of industrialization and the recession of the 1870s—had become a broadly embraced "cultural code." The writings of Otto Glagau, Heinrich von Treitschke, Wilhelm Marr, and others made "an unsatisfactory [socio-economic] situation" "comprehensible"⁷⁴ by providing Germans with a culturally familiar "other" that was ostensibly responsible for the nation's socio-economic woes. The "solution" of targeting the longstanding Jewish scapegoat was understandable, ready-to-hand, doable, and emotionally satisfying. That it was wrong—that persecuting Jews would not address the economic, geo-political, and technological factors bearing on *fin de siècle* economic instability—held little sway against the power of a culturally familiar prejudice.

Intellectuals were not immune to the *Denkstil* of the day. Treitschke in the 1860s had opposed anti-Jewish prejudice but with the conservative turn of 1878/

⁷³ David Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Hoboken; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 135.

⁷⁴ Shulamit Volkov, "Antisemitism as a Cultural Code Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany," *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 23/1 (1978): 25–46, quote from 43.

1879, Treitschke too began to “see the light” and the utility of anti-Semitic tropes.⁷⁵ Volkov explains:

Virulent attacks on capitalism, on socialism and the demands for social reforms along corporatist lines [class, ethnic, and religious groupings] were invariably associated with anti-semitism. In the eyes of many the slogan [the Jewish “other” is to blame] replaced reality. The link was made as a matter of course. It became part of the prevailing culture.⁷⁶

This returns us to Konrad Schmid’s warning at the opening of this chapter: “cultural, historical, social and religious factors influence the current [scholarly] analysis and interpretation of historical literary documents.” I will close by returning to the project on human relationality in more detail as one application of reciprocal illumination.

8 A (short) Case Study in Christian-Jewish Reciprocal Illumination

To reprise, the notion of relationality that began this project works from the idea of reciprocal constitution, where each distinct particular becomes what or who it is through relations with others, world, and transcendent. Existence is distinction-amid-relation. In developing this idea, a five-part orientation for reciprocal illumination emerged and was re-incorporated as premise and rulebook for continued inquiry. That is, explanation and examples of distinction-amid-relation were sought in a range of Christian and Jewish thought, building on the practice of debate, cultural exchange, and co-production of Jewish tradition and from the principles of: the heterogeneity of experience, epistemological humility, the value of broad-based study, and the bracketing of syncretism and imposed judgment. No idea was excluded owing solely to tradition of origin, and inclusion was based on the illumination shed on our topic of relationality. There was no expectation of convergence or reconcilability but rather of the integrity of each tradition as it illuminates relationality from its own perch.

This may sound prosaic, but it is what Magid, Thatamanil, and Meir note is not yet standard practice. Still and too often, in explicating theological ideas within a given tradition, others are felt to be extraneous or disruptive to the field of inquiry. As the task in our project was to illuminate relationality from the idea-

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 41.

tionally close but historically fraught Jewish and Christian traditions, Trinity and covenant emerged as productive sources of understanding.

8.1 Perichoresis

Perichoresis, the Cappadocian Fathers' concept of the Trinity, is one way to think about distinction-amid-relation. On this view, each distinct Trinitarian Person is who he is through donative relation, giving and receiving identity from the other Persons. God is the distinct Persons in their relations, and in turn, the Persons and relations together constitute the whole of the Godhead. John Milbank writes, person is a relational term (while essence or substance is not). Drawing on Aquinas, Milbank continues, person is "the point of equipoise between relation and substance . . . (ST [*Summa Theologica*] I, q. 29, a. 4 resp.)."⁷⁷

The identity of each Trinitarian person and, inseparably, the relations among them together constitute what each is: not just a person but a Person *of the Godhead*. These identity-relations comprise the Godhead of which each is a part. That is, absent the identities of each amid their relations, there is no Godhead to be part of. While each Trinitarian person has "its own particular distinguishing notes," as Gregory of Nyssa writes,⁷⁸ each is equal in constituting the triune whole through relation. In the Trinity, as Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, "the principles of individuality and community are at work together simultaneously."⁷⁹ Kirk Wegter-McNelly reprises: "The deity of this God resides not in the persons as distinct from one another but within and among the persons as they are related to one another, i.e., in the relationality that constitutes them and binds them."⁸⁰ Or in the words of Edith Stein, the German Jewish philosopher who became a Carmelite sister, for the persons of the Trinity, "I am' is identical

⁷⁷ John Milbank, "Christianity and Platonism in East and West," in *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy*, eds. Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Christoph Schneider (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013), 158–209, quote from 177.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, "Ad petrium," in *Saint Basil: The Letters: Vol. II (Ep. 197–227)*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (London: Heinemann, 1961), 207–209.

⁷⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 30–31, 41.

⁸⁰ Kirk Wegter-McNelly, *The Entangled God: Divine Relationality and Quantum Physics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 128–129; Wegter-McNelly is building on Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 298, 323, 335.

in meaning with ‘I give myself totally to you,’ ‘I am one with a you,’ and so also identical with ‘we are.’”⁸¹

Wolfhart Pannenberg adds that the Trinity is not only the relations among the Trinitarian Persons but relations also between the Persons and humanity.⁸² After all, two of the three Trinitarian Persons, Son and Spirit, are who they are in engagement with humanity. They are doubly relational, in the immanent Trinity (within the Godhead) and in the economic (in relation with humanity). Finally, the Trinitarian Persons teach us not only about God but also about the human condition, as Aquinas held.⁸³ God’s act of creation involves both existence coming into being and the individuation of worldly beings that are yet in relation. Said another way, as the triune God is the source of humanity, humanity is in the image of a God that is distinct Persons in necessary relations. The *imago* is triune, distinct Persons together. Thus, as we are in the image of a relational community, we too are *au fond* relational. Or as Aquinas put it: “persona est relation.”⁸⁴

If this is the case—if reciprocal formation among different entities is the *ontos*—the *telos* entails seeing and seeing *to* the layers and networks of relations that form who we are. Each person—dependent on the transcendent and on other persons for existence, identity, and flourishing—must attend to those on whom she depends as others must attend to her and as all must attend to the common weal.

8.2 Covenant

One name for this reciprocal responsibility is covenant. Covenant is a reciprocal bond where each, developing *through* relation with others, gives *for* the flourish-

⁸¹ Edith Stein, *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* (Leuven: Nauwelaerts; Freiburg: Herder, 1950), 324.

⁸² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Louisville: Westminster, 1977); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1–3*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1998); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard J. Neuhaus (Louisville: Westminster, 1969); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Vol. 1–2*, trans. George H. Kelm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971).

⁸³ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi*, ed. Pierre Mandonnet (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929), d. 2, q. 1, a. 3; d. 22, q. 1, a. 3; Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*, ed. Paul M. Pession (Turin: Marietti, 1965), q. 10, a. 5; see also, Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 256.

⁸⁴ Roland Walls, “The Church: A Communion of Persons,” in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to Prof. James Torrance*, eds. Travor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 1989), 102–109, 104–105.

ing of others. It is, Jean Lee writes, the “promise with one or more counterparty under common pursuit of shared values for long term cooperation and well-being of the community.”⁸⁵ It is the promise, shared values, and long-term communal well-being that are key and distinguish covenant from other human interactions.

Reciprocal covenants among equals are easily imagined. One innovation of the Hebrew Bible is reciprocity between unequals, between the divine and human and among persons of different status. This principle grounds the extensive biblical mandates for aiding the poor, stranger, and enemy. It contrasts with the Hittite, Assyrian, and Hammurabi codes, which provide different punishments for persons of different social status. The biblical *lex talionis*, by contrast, establishes two principles: proportionality of sanction to crime (an eye for an eye, paid in financial compensation) and the same sanction for all; no privileges for the powerful.

A second biblical innovation is that covenant is not between a greater lord and a lesser one, a vassal (as ancient suzerainty treaties were). It is a commitment between God and each person directly. The consequences of direct covenant with God include removing covenantal values, norms, and practices from the purview of the monarch, who may follow, change, or ignore them to suit royal interests. Covenantal commitments between person and God cannot be tweaked to suit regnant powers. Shai Held notes:

“The entire [human] race collectively stands vis-à-vis God in the same relationship of chosenness and protection (. . .). Genesis 1 thus represents a radical democratization of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology (. . .). The Torah’s assertion that every human being is created in the image of God is a repudiation of the idea, so common in the ancient world, that some people are simply meant to rule over others.”⁸⁶

In sum, the Hebrew Bible covenant, Robert Bellah writes, is “a charter for a new kind of people, a people under God, not under a king, an idea parallel to Athenian democracy though longer lasting . . . a people ruled by divine law, not the arbitrary rule of the state, and of a people composed of responsible individuals.”⁸⁷

Unlike contract, which protects interests, covenant protects relationships. In the reciprocity-of-giving, stipulative features might arise. But covenant is not stip-

⁸⁵ Jean Lee, “The Two Pillars Paradigm: Covenant as a Relational Concept in Response to the Contract-Based Economic Market,” PhD diss. (University of Edinburgh, 2010), 59.

⁸⁶ Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2017), 8.

⁸⁷ Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2011), 311, 323.

ulative in motive or *telos*. Where breach of contract requires compensation and generally voids the agreement, covenant endures through breaches as the biblical prophets remind us: in the most dire of times, the bond remains and will flourish anew. Hosea 14:5–6:

I will heal their [Israel's] affliction,
Generously will I take them back in love;
For My anger has turned away from them.
I will be to Israel like dew;
He shall blossom like the lily,
He shall strike root like a Lebanon tree.

Covenant begins dyadically—God-Noah, God-patriarchs—but does not remain dyadic. Persons give to God also by giving to others in need, *hekhdes* in Hebrew, or made holy. In these triune relations, one gives to God by giving to third parties, persons in need. These triangulated relations-of-giving are mutually constitutive: covenantal commitment to others is part of covenant with God, and covenant with God sustains us in covenantal commitments to others. Like the triune *imago*—understanding humanity as the image of a relational community—covenant extends out from dyad to broader communal commitments. Gift from God to person (life, sustenance) generates gift from person to neighbor and on to the next person through the giving loop, thus sustaining it.⁸⁸

Membership in the covenantal, gift-giving loop pertains to all the nations. The Bible's first covenant is with Noah, representing all humanity. The patriarchs covenant not only with God but with pagans. Indeed, the covenantal promise in Genesis three times declares that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3, 26:4, 28:14). Like the idea of covenant between unequals, this commitment to others undergirds the extensive poor laws in biblical writings⁸⁹ and in rabbinic texts.⁹⁰ The effectiveness of these laws was such that the emperor Julian cited the Jewish poor laws to prod improvement in Roman poor relief. “It

⁸⁸ See also, Jacques T. Godbout and Alain Caille, *The World of the Gift*, trans. Donald Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998).

⁸⁹ For instance, Exodus 21:2; Exodus 22:21, 25–27; Leviticus, ch. 17–26; Deut. 14:22; Deut. 15:1–2, 12–15, Deut. 20:10, 7–9, 12–15; Deut. 23:15–16, 19; Deut. 24:19–20; Ezekiel 47:22–23.

⁹⁰ Robert Gibbs, “Returning/Forgiving: Ethics and Theology,” in *Questioning God*, eds. John Caputo, Mike Dooley and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 73–91, 78.

is disgraceful,” he said, “that, when no Jew ever has to beg (. . .) all men see that our people lack aid from us.”⁹¹

Textually, we find the triune covenant—God, person, others—in the Ten Commandments, the first few of which pertain to person and God, the rest, seamlessly, to conduct among persons. In Numbers 5:6, harm to persons—that is, abrogating covenant with them—abrogates covenant with God: “Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way *and so* is unfaithful to the Lord is guilty.” The lesson of the entwined covenant—the inseparability of bond with God and among persons—is one of the most consistent teachings of prophets. Amos 5:21–24 declares: “I [God] hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me . . . But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.” One cannot have bond with God while neglecting the needy. Proverbs 21:3 reprises: “To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than [ritual] sacrifice” (see also, Hos. 6:6, Ezek. 34:1–6, Ps. 51:17, Ps. 72, Mic. 7:2–7, among others).

In modern Jewish thought, many voices reprise the covenantal point. To mention just a few, Zecharias Frankel was among the major figures in the nineteenth-century, German Reform movement before he broke with it over its extensive use of the vernacular in Jewish liturgy. He later inaugurated what became Conservative Judaism. In his “Speech at the Memorial Service for the Benefactor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Breslau” (1855), he reminded his audience: “‘So, too, do the righteous among the nations of the world have a share in the World to Come.’ And with such respect of human worth that was established and sustained by faith, it was further declared [*b. Sanhedrin* 59a]: ‘Even the non-Jew who recognizes one God and observes the ethical laws is like unto a high priest—this first promoter of faith.’”⁹² Later in the century, the Pittsburg Platform (above) rephrased the idea: “We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the infinite (. . .) we extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men.”⁹³ In the twentieth century, Abraham Joshua Heschel too held that covenantal commitments toward different others are essential to covenant with God. He writes: “righteousness is not just a value; it is God’s part of human life.”⁹⁴ Righteousness among persons is the occasion and moment of God’s presence in our midst.

⁹¹ Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism: From Tacitus to Simplicius* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980), 549–550, No. 482.

⁹² Kessler and Kohler, *Modern Jewish Theology*, 42.

⁹³ Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader*, 198, 199.

⁹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001), 255.

Yet perhaps more than any other thinker, Emmanuel Levinas’s work is an elegy to covenantal commitment. It is foundational for him (i) that each person is unique, different from others, (ii) that one’s own uniqueness is formed through covenantal commitment to the “face” of the other, and (iii) that nearing God happens through this covenantal responsibility.⁹⁵ Levinas writes, “To follow the Most-High is also to know that nothing is greater than to approach one’s neighbour.”⁹⁶ For Levinas, this is no “figure of speech” but a description of God, “who approaches precisely through this relay to the neighbor—binding men among one another with obligation, each one answering for the lives of all the others.” This “relay to the neighbor” is “the highest possible theological knowledge one can have.”⁹⁷

9 Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has sought to describe an approach to inter-theological work that emerged through a trial-and-error project on human relationality. The relationality under investigation was understood as distinction-amid-relation. The inter-theological work was envisioned as efforts by co-archeologists, together enriching the understanding of *theos*, *cosmos*, *anthropos*, and their relations. The approach that emerged from this project was one of reciprocal illumination, which strives to set self-reflexivity about habits of the mind upstream of research protocols in order both to limit the influence of cultural bias and to allow for inter-theological research that draws unprejudicially from multiple traditions. Five aspects of reciprocal illumination were discussed, along with four companion criteria from John Thatamanil’s work on a “theology of religious diversity.” As these emerged, they were recycled back into the relationality project as premises and rulebook for further inquiry. The chapter concludes with an example of reciprocal illumination where notions of Trinity and covenant together shed light on the concept of relationality as distinction-amid-relation.

Three aspects of reciprocal illumination are epistemological humility, the value of studying broadly, and the possibility that ideas considered true in one

⁹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979), 78.

⁹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (New York: Bloomsbury, 1994), 142.

⁹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 171.

tradition may nonetheless be enriched by another. These are longstanding in the production of Jewish thought, in its reliance on debate among multiple positions, exchange, “entanglement,” inter-religious “co-production,” and the epistemological humility of considering many sources and views. Reciprocal illumination is quasi-midrashic. Said more poetically by a wise mind who thought a good deal about this: “A confident people is not exclusive. A great religion affirms other religions. A great culture affirms other cultures. A great nation affirms other nations. A great individual affirms other individuals, validates the beingness of others”—Leonard Cohen, 1994.⁹⁸

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⁹⁸ Jeff Burger, ed., *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 388.

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