

DRAWING THE **BOUNDARY** BETWEEN THE BIBLICAL RELIGIONS

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Dear Mr. Lieberman:

When you spoke in our church (South Congregational UCC, Centerville), you had my open support, & time & again I've rejoiced to hear good news about your work & your people. Our difference on where to draw the boundary between Judaism & Christianity is slight in comparison with the weight of our agreements on biblical religion, on what's wrong with the world, & on what's to be done for our religions to continue to be good news on Cape Cod & in the world.

1 Since we are both theists, the baseline question is not where you or I, Judaism or Christianity, draws the line, but where God does, if anywhere. I'm reminded of the child's prayer, after studying a globe: "God, did you draw those lines between the countries?" Right now, more lines are in the process of being redrawn than at any time since the fateful 1918 Peace Conference. Ethnicity & nationalism & nativism are intolerant of political boundaries they see as violating their turfs, & religious fundamentalisms further complicate the picture. Political parties want to gerrymander more power for themselves. And religions that survive do so partly by positive & negative self-definition, an essential for all human groupings.

2 Thank you for your long & careful 2 Dec 91 / 25 Kislev 5752 letter of response to my 1 Dec 91 TIMES letter, which was a response to your 26 Nov 91 TIMES letter. (My letter is incorporated in Thinksheet #2526, herewith.) Unidentified quotes below are from your letter, & full enough so my readers need not have read your letter to me. What follows assumes you have read #2526.

3 I note that your boundary sense is keen enough to include time: you add, to the Christian date, the Jewish date. Over the decades I've gotten many letters from rabbis, some of them former students of mine at New York Theological Seminary. Few of them included the Jewish date. You are young, & it may be that in the current pluralistic-multicultural atmosphere of America, young rabbis have a sharpened sense of tradition, of peoplehood, of separation from what's now being called the majority (ie Christian) culture. I'm noting, not objecting. But the Jewish date on your letter seems to signal a separatism strong enough to stimulate you to write your TIMES letter attack on Jews you think should stop calling themselves Jews. And the fact of my TIMES letter, as well as its contents, shows that your superseparationism irritated me into attacking you.

4 For all I know, you & other Jewish leaders need to be as touchy as you are if Judaism is to survive. With more than half your kids marrying our (gentile) kids, you have some grounds for survival anxiety, in addition to the ever-refreshed memory of Shoa-Holocaust. But we (Christians) are the best friends you (Jews) have in the world, & we ought to put more energy into mutual support than into emphasizing differences....In a Thinksheet titled, "Mutual blasphemers, love one another!" I pled for intellectual honesty as necessary to mutual support. You Jews see us Christians as blasphemers: we say God became a man. We Christians see you Jews as blasphemers: God became a man, & you rejected him. So what's new? What's new is that increasing numbers of us in both religions long to discover fresh ways of mutual support without trying to paper over the blasphemies, as so much Jewish/Christian dialog of the past has done.

5 After I'd asked the question to begin #2526, I received your answer: "The term 'Jewish-Christian' is an oxymoron and I believe the Jewish community is well within its rights in defining the acceptable parameters of Jewish belief." The second clause of your compound sentence is unexceptionable, a platitude; but the first clause is a personal opinion, & should read "is in my opinion [or "in traditional rabbinical opinion"] an oxymoron." Without some such qualifier, your

statement strikes me as arrogant, dogmatic in the bad sense.

6 You may have caught the fullpage p.81 NW 16 Dec 91 Jews for Jesus ad headed "Sure I'm Jewish. And I celebrate Christmas." You want them to say only that they are Christians, but they call themselves both Jews & Christians, one foot in each circle. When I've preached in Unitarian-Universalist churches, I've met members who continue to consider themselves Jews. Pastor Robt. Boynton of the UCC South Dartmouth MA congregation tells me that Jews can join his church without Christian baptism & continue to consider themselves Jews; & that the **syncretism** appears even in the neologism they came up with to avoid calling the congregation either a church or a synagogue: *synakirk*. Weird, I'd say. You'd say worse.

7 You say the earliest Christians "placed themselves beyond the pale of Jewish thought and practice." That would have been news to them. Their Lord Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, as they were (JESUS' JEWISHNESS: EXPLORING THE PLACE OF JESUS WITHIN EARLY JUDAISM, ed. by J.H.Charlesworth, Crossroad/Continuum/90. Preface: Jesus' "life and thought are properly understood within the cosmopolitan, creative, and diverse groups that shaped pre-70 Judaism." This accurate portrayal of Jesus & his earliest followers invites Jews & Christians to dialog on this "shared ground.").

8 As an evangelical Christian, I'm allergic to intellectually dishonest syncretisms. So it had never occurred to me that anyone would leap from the fact that you worship in a former Christian meetinghouse to the false conclusion that you are practicing Jewish-Christian syncretism. I do object, however, to your stationery's picturing the Christian-built building & dating it "Circa 1797." Only the few who know the history would not conclude, from the stationery & the street-sign, that you Jews have been worshipping there since the late 18th century. The deception may not be intentional, but your practice is offensive to Christians, & misleading to any who are interested in picking up historical bits about Cape Cod.

9 It's a mere quibble for you to deny saying what I said you said, viz "They [so-called "messianic" Jews] are not Jews." That was precisely the message of your TIMES letter. Then you said "the statement came from a Christian minister," the Southern Baptist you quote. Again, it didn't, but that was the burden of the Southern Baptist's statement. Why does he want a clean-clear boundary between Jews & Christians? Because for four generations his mission board has devoted major attention to converting Jews. He & you want a sharp boundary, but for opposite reasons.

10 Of late, Jewish & Christian scholars have given serious attention to the Gospel of **Matthew** vis-a-vis Jewish/Christian relations. Eg, (1) J. Andrew Overman's MATTHEW'S GOSPEL AND FORMATIVE JUDAISM: THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE MATTHEAN COMMUNITY, Fortress/90. Mt.'s community presents itself as "a sect within Judaism." Christianity & rabbinism were twins, but soon became (p.160) "a family falling apart." 161: "Formative Judaism and the Matthean community have a stake in one another and cannot be understood...apart from each other." (2) Graham Stanton's A GOSPEL FOR A NEW PEOPLE: STUDIES IN MATTHEW, T.&T.Clark/91. Christians are coming to see themselves as "a third race" incorporating Jews & gentiles but in need of defining themselves more over against the former than the latter. (3) Amy-Jill Levine's THE SOCIAL AND ETHNIC DIMENSIONS OF MATTHEAN SALVATION HISTORY, Edwin Mellen/91. Salvation is nonethnic, though it's to be offered first to Jews (10.5b: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles"; cp. Paul [Ro.1.16, "to the Jew first"; but see his ambivalence, as both a Jew & a Christian, in chaps.9-11]).

11 Christianity & Rabbinism are "the two main Judaisms," says Gabriele Boccaccini in MIDDLE JUDAISM: JEWISH THOUGHT 300 BCE - 200 CE, Fortress/91....Robt. S. MacLennan, EARLY CHRISTIAN TEXTS ON JEWS AND JUDAISM, Scholars Press/90: self-definition, little of overt attacks on Judaism....Jean Danielou, THE THEOLOGY OF JEWISH CHRISTIANITY, Westm./78.