

WHAT'S INCONCEIVABLE IS UNBELIEVABLE

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Dear _____,

Being an unmet admirer of yours--for caring about ultimate consequentials & assiduously dealing with them in spite of difficulties--I write this appreciative-critical note on your book manuscript, which I have in hand with your permission via the Christian who over some years, & at refusal of monetary gain, has visited you regularly to converse with you & act as your amanuensis. I hope you will receive this note as an honor to & prayer for you.

1 The day I read your MS, I received in the mail a letter from another Jew as **Jesus-infatuated** as you. "If you wish to follow Joshua bar Joseph's [Jesus'] way" & "abide by his intentions," become a Reform Jew (as he has, in following Jesus). How could you both, being equally virulently antiChristian, be Jesus-infatuated? You are not Jesus-infatuated as lovers (in Jesus-devotion, as I am) but as puzzlers, as thinkers for whom Jesus is, above all others, history's radiant riddle, on the yid/goy historical-global boundary ("The most he wanted [in the direction of what was to become Christianity] was Judaism for gentiles," says the letter). The irony does not escape me: Some of you Jews put in more time & soul-searching & mind-sweat on Jesus than do most Christians! I'm glad I'm not God & have to sort that out!

2 Being an ordained Christian minister for a half century, a teacher of the Bible (in Hebrew & Greek) & of much else in religion (as well as a pastor &, in other capacities also, a servant of God in & through the churches), I'm aware of the personal & social interweave of spirituality (experiencing the Transcendent-Immanent), religion (expressing that experience habitually & institutionally), & theology (making sense of life, relationships, suffering, the world, death, & God in light of one's spirituality & religion & the spirituality & religion of others). All three of these dimensions are as natural as sex & as easy to mess up on. You are working very earnestly on sense-making, on theology, & I praise you for it to the extent that what you are doing is more than self-serving, self-justifying (& only God can know that proportion, in your case or mine). Why my self-reference in this \$? Because it shows that the one who is praising you for the creativity of your historical & theological constructs knows creativity when he sees it: you're doing some fresh, clear thinking--even to an old scholar such as I am, startlingly fresh & clear. You are using for fun & profit the wonderful brain-mind God gave you, & I view such use as itself a form of worship, of praise to the one God.

3 I praise you, too, for the courage of your creativity. Your logic is relentless, not counting the cost. (My praise is modulated when I remember one of my definitions of sin: Sin is anything extended far enough in a straight line. So is stupidity. I leave almost entirely to God the extent to which your thinking may be stupid & sinful.) As for your clarity, that derives from your totalism in applying pleasure/pain as your hermeneutic principle--in my opinion, an excessive, reductionistic reliance.

4 Your rationalism is reminiscent of David Friedrich Strauss' LIFE OF JESUS (AD/CE 1835). You & he deal inadequately with the mix of meaning & mystery vis-a-vis Jesus, reducing the mystery to zero. Time & again, in studying your MS, it seemed to me your argument was chasing its tail. The Incarnation (the one God becoming a human being named Jesus) is inconceivable to you, so it's unbelievable; & it's inconceivable because it's unbelievable (or at least you have the will not to believe it). What I find unbelievable is this circularity, this solipsistic reversible proposition. Incarnational theology can be as thoroughly rational, given the premise that God has come to us ("immanu-el") in & as Jesus, as your theology is thoroughly rational once one grants you (as I don't!) the premise that God's becoming a human being is inconceivable & therefore unbelievable & thus nonsense. Your book is brilliant theological fiction (literally, something you've "made"), but essentially unconvincing to anyone beginning, as we Christians do, with the incarnational premise.

5 You enjoy using the word "ridiculous" against those whose logic breaks down--as though never yourself having it both ways, & as though logical cohesion were the supreme virtue of thought & discourse. As to the latter, I'm reminded of Bertrand Russell's early-in-life saying that "Human beings are most interesting when their logic breaks down" (a rationalism with, as yours, a tinge of cynicism); but also of this when older (though still younger than you!): "In this confusing world, the greatest mystery & the greatest good is Christian love."

Well, where does your logic break down? Where do I find you to be "ridiculous" in the sense of self-contradictory (though I'd not use so strong a word against you)? A stunning instance: In **creation**, you say, God, who is spirit, makes part of himself into matter; yet you would consider "ridiculous" our Christian claim of just this divine power, the power of self-materialization, in the case of the **incarnation** (eg, Jn.1.14: God "became flesh, a human being" whom people [1Jn.1.1,3] saw & heard). Does this internal contradiction exist in traditional Judaism? It does not: with almost no exceptions (the apostate monist-pantheist Spinoza being one), the notion of divine materiality (under any construction) is not only abhorrent but also blasphemous. (Spinoza, unlike you, is not in self-contradiction. For him, the divine does not materialize but always is Substance--so his denial of God's incarnation in Jesus is not, as it is with you, a case of special pleading due to the Jewish desire to deny Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.)

Another instance of special pleading is your **smuggling the "soul"** into what otherwise you claim to be a stripped-down, essential, basic Judaism--a claim implicit in your severe criticism of others who, you claim, pollute Judaism with foreign matter. You who berate us Christians for our mixing of Judaism & Hellenisticism in our devotion & theology, do you not see that you yourself have done that in adopting the unJewish notion of the "soul"? And can you not see your unfairness (a moral flaw) to us Christians in forbidding our doing what you yourself do in your theology (according to your logic, an intellectual flaw)? (This is an open letter, anonymously addressed, so I should add, for those who read the letter but not your book, this quotation from the latter, p.4: "To create the universe, God used a small part of His being and converted it into matter....God also converted a small part of His being and created a soul for every human being," a soul so paganly conceived as to make nonsense of the Jewish & Christian doctrine of resurrection, a doctrine you have no use for.) Now, both incarnation & the soul are unJewish concepts: why do you laugh at us Christians for fusing the former with Judaism & not also at yourself for doing the same with the latter? It's easy for you to laugh, but hard for you to listen.

Again, your behavior contradicts your doctrine, which includes the denial of free will: I've never read a more willful book. You revel in your freedom to be a freethinker! Both your religion & your morality demand the premise of free will, for you stress the divine invitation "Be holy [which you render as "righteous"], for I am holy"; & then you spell out specifically what that holiness-righteousness is which we may choose **or** (in free will!) reject.

6 As a biblical scholar, I'm deeply offended by your overt **eisegesis**, your use of your theology as a cookie-cutter on the Bible. And you're upfront, bald, about it (p.18): "I am preparing comment on the Bible with my personal explanation of meaning in order that it will agree with my theology." This project you carry out on what you call the "Testament" (ie, NT: for you, "Bible" means the Hebrew Bible) ruthlessly, claiming by your process to produce "the true Jesus." Not surprising that this eisegetic process yields a satisfactory result (p.22): "I have removed the religious foundation of Christianity."

7 You always were alienated from Christianity: how long have you been alienated from Judaism except your own idiosyncratic version of it? I highly respect your long life-journey & believe God wants us to be storytellers of God, the world, & ourselves; but your retelling of God's story is so radical as to constitute **betrayal**, biblical unfaithfulness. You exult more in your denials ("God never spoke to anybody," "Miracles never happen," "There never existed a Holy Spirit," "God didn't choose Israel [but Israel was first to discover God]," "God does not interfere in the affairs of mankind," "People have no free will," "God does not punish") than in your affirmations. Yet every soul is (immorally) destined for "happiness," you say!