Jews and Christians confront one another AND unite:

MUTUAL BLASPHEMERS, LOVE ONE ANOTHER!

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Phone 508.775.8008 3 Sept 88
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Just now, a few minutes ago, a conversation ended between a person whose parents were goys & a person who had a yid mother & a goy father. For the purposes of this Thinksheet, the second name is not important; the first is, because its his, my, reflections on the conversations--the Thinksheet a letter, though not in letter form, inviting to the continuance of the conversation....Suppose you were thinking Christian but going regularly to synagogue rather than church? You would be, would you not, in transition to Christian commitment. Or the reverse, which is my friend's case: thinking Jewish ("Jesus is a blasphemer," and thus Christians are also), he goes regularly to church. But is he in transition to regular synagogue worship? Probably not, for he would view that as retribalization. Judaism is "tribal" (and therefore unacceptable), Christianity is "blasphemous" (and therefore unacceptable). Yet instead of being in the secular no-man's-land between the two religions--secularly neutralized, as are multitudes from mixed-marriage parental homes--he is as God-intoxicated as was Spinoza, who was excommunicated from the synagogoe for (yes) blasphemy. And his God-intoxication has deep roots and rich fruits in both Christianity and Judaism....I hope this Thinksheet does not entangle its two feet and fall over. It's two purposes are (1) to spell out the title and (2) to present my friend as a living symbol of the problems and possibilities of relations between Jews today and tomorrow as we face a world increasingly hostile to our faith (the biblical, which historically has taken the form of our two religions).

1. Jews & Christians are inherently committed to loving one another and existentially in the habit of not doing so. Unless we are to abide in this hypocrisy, this bad habit must be **broken**--broken existentially by being together and developing affection for one another, broken intellectually by thinking together ("dialog"), broken spiritually by interfaith occasions of worship (private as well as public), and broken actionally (by mutual action in situations calling for confronting violations of the biblical way of seeing, and living in, the world).

2. **Honesty** is not optional if dialog is to be humanly productive. And honesty here demands mutual confronting of the fact of mutual **blasphemy**. "Blasphemy!"--the single word on a poster being carried yesterday up and down in front of a Boston theater showing "The Last Temptation of Christ"--is a gut-and-mind reaction in the presence of what is felt-and-thought to violate the holy, the fount and origin of all value and virtue. I have been known to shout it out in public meeting, so I can understand both Jews who did it in Jesus' presence and Christians who've done it in the presence of Jews. (My former reference is to the Jesus of the gospels, who makes claims which, to Jews, appear to be excessive for humanity and encroaching on the territory of divinity. This is the Jesus, Jesus Christ, of Christianity. I believe this Jesus to be continuous with "the historical Jesus": I am a Christian. Anyone who knowingly denies this Jesus is to me, to Christians, a blasphemer, as rejecting God come among us in and as Jesus, "Immanu-el.")

3. Can light (holiness as committedness to a holy, a religion) have fellowship with darkness (denial, rejection, of that holy)? In nature, light and darkness do have fellowship, are a continuity. And our two religions commit us to mutual love in spite of the structural mutual blasphemy.... Why is all this, so obvious, usu. left unspoken? Because of the **danger**: the gut side of blasphemy as gut-and-mind reaction is a deep cause of antichristianism and antijudaism. Honest & informed dialog shifts the weight from gut to mind, freeing us to **admit and accept** the mutual blasphemy as built-in, something nobody from either side or from outside can do anything to eliminate. Yet the actual situation qualifies the starkness of the double-blasphemy dilemma. Uncommitted, "culture" Christians & "culture" Jews, whether or not observant, can get along together without the blasphemy element, as neither belong to the holy: such Jews do not really believe that the Jewish people are singly, only among the peoples of the world, chosen to be "a light to the nations"; and such Christians do not really believe that Jesus is God come among us (the incarnation). God bless them at least for supporting their mutual goodwill by humanistic considerations. For the imperative of mutual goodwill, however sanctioned, is the ground common to the uncommitted and the committed. Humanism's sentimentality, blurred vision and slurred speech, however, cannot promise any depth of improved Jewish/Christian relations.

4. Judaism & Christianity are blasphemies to each other: religion & philosophy are **scandals** to each other. As religion sees it, philosophy commits the scandals of <u>generality</u> (wanting the fruits without feeding the roots) and of <u>rarification</u>

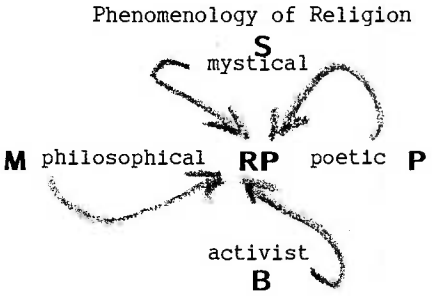
(neglecting, if not also despising, concretions, and adoring, if not also reifying, abstrations). As philosophy sees it, religion commits the scandals of particularity (insisting on at the least the interdependence of the concrete and abstract, if not--as in idolatry and magic, if not also sacrament--depending the latter upon the former) and of provinciality (explicitly or at least implicitly teaching the superiority of one's tradition and commitment, an insistence that makes interreligious, intertribal, international conflict unavoidable, and global unity unattainable).

5. At age 46, my friend has never actually made a commitment to a religion (inwardly) & (outwardly) religious praxis: he's a philosopher-poet-singer, a **gnostic** in worshiping through nouns, a **poet** in worshiping through images, a **singer** in worshiping through songs said (esp. the Psalms) and sung (in his case, in a half dozen languages). He has created his own mystic philosophy and calls it religion, then he calls this nonreligion by the names of various religions, including Christianity and (currently) Judaism. (In the second conversation today, he said to me "Treat me as someone in Bet Israel, and don't try to persuade me otherwise," then--to honor what Tillich, another who played this trick on himself, called "the God beyond god (and all gods)"--he alluded to Gita 10.6, Krsna's saying "The seers...sprang from my thoughts." It's vital to illustrate how this self-deception works. Let's take the case of **Jeremiah 10.10**, the centerpiece of my friend's side of our first conversation. Ironically, Hebrew, by using nouns with adjectival and adverbial force, plays into the hands of his gnosticism. Here's the verse, parsing the English as the Hebrew: "Lord God truth, you God life and king universe." Literalistically and wrongly, my friend rendered this (mentioning only the first clause) as "The Lord God is truth," meaning (gnostically) Truth is god--conveniently freeing my friend to use "truth" as the container for what he personally has to say about anything and everything. (In other contexts, my friend uses "God is love" to mean both that and "Love is god.") Even if a responsible translator could be found to render, here, *emeth* by the English noun "truth," the context would forbid treating it as an abstraction or even an appellative: it's an embattled descriptive claim for a very particular god, the Jewish, among the gods. Only mistranslation can yield the illusion that the statement is free from the scandal of religious particularity, free to represent the universality my friend images it does. My friend wants it both ways: to affirm his mother's **roots** (accepting the Jewish scandal of particularity, yet without what he calls its tribalism) while making YHWH talk like KRSNA, the Jewish God like a Hindu deity, then claiming that this (mystical-philosophical, he supposes religious) **reach** is superior to Christianity, in which God "blasphemously" appears as, not appears to be, a man (as though Christianity bears a greater burden of particularity than does Judaism--an unsustainable proposition). See, now, two responsible translations of the Jeremiah verse: (1) a JEWISH [TANAKH, 1985, adverbial]: "the Lord is truly God"; (2) a CHRISTIAN [TEV, 1976, adjectival]: "you, Lord, are the true God."....As for the two particularities, they are one: humankind saved, messianically, by (1) a tribe, the Jewish, or (2) an individual of that tribe, Jesus (in the Christian view) fulfiling and transcending his tribe, though (in my view, and in that of increasing numbers of Christians) not abnegating the Jewish people's mission. My friend, however, rejects the whole idea of religion as salvific, a notion he holds to be anthropocentric and egocentric: "worship is for honoring God, not for obtaining salvation"; we are not "saved in exchange for worship."

6. Highly pertinent is **John 8**, where the early Christians ("Jesus") and the Jews they were arguing with as the child, Christianity, and the mother, Judaism, were in the process of mutual anti-shaping (the Jews here called "the Pharisees"). God and the devil were the fathers, one of the one group and the other of the other--and each side knew which was which. This eristic expression of paternity was one way the mutual blasphemy got expressed on both sides, and we would be wrong--and false also to the Gospel of John!--to read that heat literally, ie, for either Jews or Christians today to think-speak-act as though the devil were the other's father, and so give 'em hell. At issue was, is, *emeth-alitheia* (the hyphen representing that the Greek of the Fourth Gospel, as is true of the Greek of the earliest Christian Bible, the LXX Old Testament, has Hebrew close behind and within it), **truth**. Note the close parallel, in tone & con-

tent, between Jer.10 (our §5) and Jn.8: "true" religion resisting untrue-false-unreal. Resistance language, from the lexicon of controversy. Use your concordance to see how often, and with what forces, this author uses "truth" in his Gospel and Letters (I-3). Now note Jn.8.31f: "If you obey my teaching, you are **truly** my disciples; you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will set you free." The last two phrases (in KJV) are carved in a stone arch of the U. of Chicago's divinity complex, and usu. misread by passersby as meaning that truth frees you (the message of the school's Latin motto, which says that as knowledge increases, life exfoliates, opens up). Face to face with challenges to his community's integrity and even existence, our two authors closely associate their deity with truth, verity, reality: Κύριος is "the LORD" YHWH in LXX (the Christians' first "Bible") and, usu., "the LORD" Jesus in the NT--to Jews, a blasphemous identification; for us Christians, with our high christology, a quite natural identification, a trinitarian-incarnational continuum. Jesus is "full of grace and **truth**" (1.14,17), and can say (14.6) "I am the **true** and living way," a statement whose English adjectives are Greek (from Hebrew-Aramaic) nouns (literally, "I am the way, the **truth**, and the life"). Note the startling resemblance to our Jer. passage, the full vs.10: "You, Lord, are the **true** God, you are the **living** God and the eternal **King**." In this the Fourth Gospel, the Holy Spirit comes to confirm Jesus as **true** and to guide Christians in Jesus' **truth** (14.17, 16.13); Jesus prays "Dedicate them [my disciples] to Yourself by means of the **truth**; your Word is **truth**" (17.17); Jesus says "I was born and came into the world for this one purpose, to speak about the **truth**. Whoever belongs to the **truth** listens to me" (18.37; followed immediately by Pilate's asking "And what is **truth**?").

7. In the living context of every religion, activists, mystics, poets, and philosophers produce their **versions** in the process of ingesting (whether or not personally practicing) the environing religion. That process has been the central passion of my friend's life. An omnivorous reader living on a stimulating island (Manhattan), he has thus laid himself in debt to all the world's major religions, especially to the poetic-mystical-philosophical expressions thereof. Paradoxically, he is both irreligious (as not practicing any particular religion) and consumingly religious (interiorly, and as exploring **religions proper**, ie, various religious praxes). Let's do a visual on this:



"RP" is religion proper, religious praxis, being observant or "active." These folk are "the continuity," without whom the religion dies, ceases to be one of "the world's living religions," becomes a dead (and soon forgotten) religion; and its parasites (nonobservant mystics, philosophers, and poets) die with it....As for the positioning of the four versions, my students will recognize "S" as spirit, "M" as mind (analytic), "P" as psyche (intuitive, imaginal, fantastic), and "B" as body, here for "activist," ie, getting involved, under the impetus of the religion proper, to make a difference in the world. My friend is into all four versions of religion-tinged activity--in my opinion, in this order of importance to him: poetic, mystical, philosophical, activist. The arrows show him as dependent on, by not contributing (by praxis) to, religion(s). Were he to make a religious commitment and become faithful to that religion's praxis, the arrows would have heads on both ends: he'd be both contributing to, and dependent on, that religion.

8. "I knew immediately that is my faith," said my friend, of **Maimon**(ides)'s GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED, which he's just read for the first time. At least for the time being, he has found a spiritual companion, a fellow-shaped soul, in history; and the discovery has brought him a measure of peace and joy. Though he does not practice Judaism (as did Maimon [d.1204] and his great Jewish predecessors), he opined today that if he'd his life to live over, "I'd probably be a Reform rabbi." For the past year or so, Jesus has been for him the supreme rabbi; but now "I do not rank him above Maimonides."....As Maimon is certain to have a revival as Christian/Jewish relations improve, let's look at what my friend finds so attractive in him (my quotes being from my friend in one or the other of our conversations today, not from

Maimon):

(1) "Man's one job is to worship the God of Being," and not use religion as a self-aggrandizing "transaction." In being willing to sacrifice his only son, Abraham did not win his salvation; rather, he showed his unconditional loyalty. Irony: the Apostle Paul couldn't agree more with my friend! (NB: I'm not giving a thumbnail of Maimon; I'm recording my friend's impressions of him, from reading the GUIDE, which aims at leaving the reader less "perplexed," and in my friend's case achieved its aim).

(2) "God is noncontingent Being." Here I made two comments: [1] Most Christian hymnals contain an antiChristian line, viz, "without a form is He" (in the Jewish hymn "The God of Abram Praise"), but the newer hymnals are eliding the stanza having that line. Christians take the line to mean (as in Romans 1) that God does not have, or take, the forms of beasts; but the author's intent surely was to distinguish Judaism from Christianity, which teaches (continuous with humanity's being in the "image of God," Gn.1.26) that Jesus was/is uniquely "in the form of God" (Phil.2.6 et al); and [2] Maimon's "noncontingent" (on which compare Tillich) is like my "unconfinable" (#80, my Bates College Annual Lecturship, "The Unconfinable"). God, however, does not sacrifice noncontingency, unconfinability, in choosing contingency (to be the God of creation and history) and even confinability (most radically, Jesus' cross and tomb). Even God's name as given to Moses, "I will be [to you] what [in following me, you will discover that] I will be [to you]," or "I am that I am," is not absolutely non-contingent; it is contextual, situational; and the fact that it is a name at all is confining.

In short, I as a Christian appreciate Maimon for the same reasons my friend does, and it enriches my religion. The GUIDE is on my list of the 150 great books.

9. Said my friend, "I don't see anything new in the NT [in comparison with the OT]" except the incarnation and that "Jesus was trying to overcome Judaism as a private club." The fact that he was executed can be explained by his youth: if he'd gotten old, "he'd have been over the take-on-your-elders stage of life." For my friend, the incarnation is out; but Jesus remains fascinating, attractive, the deliverer from tribalism (different from Maimon, who remained a tribalist)....My gnosticizing friend finds Jesus unattractive at two points:

(1, stated) He appealed to "the mediocre." (Yes, there's an elitist, snooty strain in my friend.) But we Christians view this with pride, not shame: Jesus is God come to humanity (as Bonhoeffer put it) "from below," from the perspective of "the poor," the un- and dis-advantaged.

(2, unstated) Jesus was no philosopher (such as the Jews' Philo [d.ca.AD/CE 54], Spinoza [d.1677], and Maimon) and no mystic (such as the kabbalists and gematrists). In the Fourth Gospel Jesus appears as somewhat gnostic (which makes that Gospel attractive to him, but not as attractive as the Gospel of Thomas, in which Jesus is, like my friend, a gnostic). But, now, he finds that Gospel's Jesus more repulsive than attractive--repulsive because of what he considers this Jesus' blasphemous messianic pretensions (the "I am..."'s, eg). "I will never bow down to this blasphemer." Yet he likes Krsna's 51 "I am..."'s in the Gita: my friend's basic scriptures are Hindu & Buddhist, and he has a tough time reading Jesus in that light, though the Gospel of Thomas made it possible for him; he's been reading the Psalms in that light, and now he's included Jeremiah. Yet this: The three Western religions, "accepting the Sinai tradition, are more life-affirming than the religions of India & China." Taking history seriously, as the religions of India & China do not, why wouldn't the Western religions be more life-affirming? But taking history seriously is what prophets--not philosophers, poets, mystics--do. Abraham, Moses, Jesus.

10. Said my friend, "God is the force of love and peace in the universe." The roots of this religioethical conviction of his are chiefly biblical (OT & NT). For me, God is personal, not an impersonal "force"; rather, God transcends the very real bright and dark forces, and ultimately controls them.

11. "Maybe if there hadn't been a Holocaust, I could deal with this" (meaning Christianity, even the incarnation). But the Holocaust is an even greater theological challenge to Judaism than it is to Christianity.