

A COMPARISON OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

By Rev. Dr. Tim Dissmeyer. 8/4/04

Since Christianity originally emerged from Judaism, there is a lot in common between them. Christianity itself can be described as a splitting off from its parent religion of Judaism.

1. Since the beginning of Christianity there have always been those who claimed to be both Jewish and Christian. The first Christians were all Jews. The founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, was a Jew. The organizer of the earliest churches, Paul of Tarsus, was a Jew. One of the earliest problems the fledgling church faced was how to define itself once non-Jews wanted to become followers of Jesus. Even today there are groups of messianic Jews who claim they are both.
2. Christianity in its earliest stages retained several Jewish features: some of the structure of worship in the synagogue, the observance of the Sabbath (even though for most Christians the actual day the Sabbath was celebrated and even its meaning changed), the use of specific special seasons of the year such as Pentecost and Passover, though Christians and Jews see these in different forms.
3. There are deep religious ties which they hold in common, the biggest of which is the use of many books of the Bible, the Old Testament for the Christians and the Tanakh for the Jews. And though the Christian New Testament contains major elements which are unique to Christians, much of it does not reject but is built upon basic faith tenets of Judaism.
4. They both contain the same conception of God as one, as personal, as concerned about human beings, with whom we communicate using prayer and meditation. Both emphasize the highest priority of obedience to God's will and the enjoyment of His presence in our daily lives. Both see God as a God of justice requiring moral or ethical behavior as essential to righteous living. Both see God as working through both law and mercy to bring about His will in human society. And finally, both see God as a living God who acts within human history, within human events and relationships to fulfill His will.
5. Both hold a basically similar understanding of how God and humanity relate to each other. Humans are designed for an eternal fellowship with God that does not end with death, though through most of the pre-Christian era the Jews did not have faith in the resurrection of the dead, their faith has had this since the first century of the Common Era.
6. In both there is a strong understanding of the covenant God has established between Himself and humanity. This covenant contains not only common moral and ritual elements as has been stated above, but contains as well a prophetic interpretation of how history works, though they see this differently because of the Christian application of how faith in Christ fits into history as Christians see Christ as the ultimate prophet.
7. Both see sin as breaking down the relationship with God and as not trusting God, as elevating the human self above God in disobedience to His will. As a result of sin both see harmful effects within the human heart, within human social relationships and between God and humanity. What results for both are eternal consequences in losing possible reward in heaven and reaping possible punishment in hell.
8. Both regard salvation as at the center of and the main focus of the human relationship with God. For both salvation ultimately depends upon God's forgiveness of human sin because of His steadfast love for us. His love is beyond our understanding or control, since He freely withholds His wrath and offers sinners a second chance. We on our part must respond to His forgiveness by repenting of our sin and resolving to not sin again.
9. Both look forward to a future messianic age when God's power will govern all things everywhere. Both see God as having chosen a special group of people through whom He will cause His power to reign and to whom He has given the important task of preparing everyone else for God's reign when it comes.
10. The one central difference between Judaism and Christianity is that Judaism denies Jesus is the Messiah, meaning "the anointed one of God" which from the Greek is Christ. Judaism sees him as a great teacher, perhaps even as an important prophetic figure, and that is all. Their argument is that Jesus cannot be the Messiah because the Messianic Age of God's reign has clearly not begun yet: there is still sin and from this crime and war, causing human suffering.

Christians agree there is still much sin and ensuing suffering, but that Jesus was and remains the Messiah, the Christ who launched God's reign. Thus we now live between the ages, when evil still reigns in part, but wherever God's truth and will reign that His ultimate reign has begun and continues to grow in and through the effects of Christ, as the Son of God, working through God's Holy Spirit. In Christ all of God's promises in the Bible

are fulfilled, and the New Covenant taught by Jeremiah and Ezekiel and other prophets now supercedes the Old Covenant with many of its laws. Jesus as Christ has become the New Moses who is leading His people out of spiritual bondage and into total freedom, where this bondage is being bound to sin and death, where this freedom is life in a new land of eternal fellowship with God. His crucifixion and resurrection from the dead are now celebrated at Holy Week and Easter as a more complete Passover. God has chosen another group of people to be His chosen people: the church, comprised of all those who accept Jesus as the Christ and as the bringer of a New Covenant. To them God has given new laws, new rituals, a new mission, a new Sabbath.

11. One final difference between Judaism and Christianity concerns their basic different views of how salvation happens in humanity. In Judaism human effort is essential. God's grace through His covenant with the Jewish people has given everyone the freedom to obey God and do good or to disobey and to do evil. In Judaism through God's gift of the Torah people have been given freedom of will, the ability to resist and the ability to submit to the yetzer ha-ra (inclination to do evil which God has given to everyone). By choosing to follow God's law as it is given in the Torah, people may follow God's will. If they do so they will be supported by God's grace and God will eternally reward them. If they choose to disobey and rebel from God's law, God will eternally punish them. So God is always offering reminders and encouragement to freely choose to obey Him and thereby to find true life.

In contrast, in Christianity the essential factor is not human effort, but God's grace shown in Jesus Christ. People are not by themselves able to choose good over evil because they are, apart from God trapped in sin. People are caught in evil, in sin as a state of being more than merely a single act or series of disobedient actions. Left alone humanity has lost the ability to know and follow God. Their sinful state is seen as a radical separation from and rebellion from who God is, who each human self is, and who other people are. The result of this is that people live lives cut off from all that is good and whole, lives that are broken, despairing, meaningless, anxious, violent, guilty, lonely and unhappy. From such lives people are totally unable to free themselves by their own power and effort. We cannot redeem nor save ourselves by our own skill. Our situation by ourselves is hopeless and paralyzed. Our only hope to be freed from this and to be thus redeemed is through the miracle of God's grace that is freely given to us in and through the life, the message, the death and resurrection of Christ.

What humanity can and must do to be redeemed is to give up trying to achieve salvation by themselves and to stop trying to be righteous through their own efforts. The only way to be redeemed from sin and death is to respond to God's working in their lives. This is called repentance of one's sin and acceptance of the gift of salvation from and through Christ. This is called the doctrine of justification by faith through the free gift of God's grace. By accepting this free gift one acquires the ability to repent, one accepts God's presence and working within one's soul, one submits to God's direction and guidance. As God continues to guide us and as we continue to follow Him, our lives are genuinely connected to God's grace and this grace empowers us to live the life which is salvation. All of this becomes evidence of the power and presence of God within each person and within all of human history. The divine source of this power is referred to among Christians as the Trinity, the tri-form description of the one true God as God the Creator, God the redeemer who is Jesus Christ and God the sustainer who is the Holy Spirit. This Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which Christians voluminously maintain is strictly and essentially monotheistic, is a major point of disagreement for all others who maintain strict monotheism themselves: the Jews and Muslims.