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Rabbi Asher Finkel, Ph.D., *Seton Hall University*



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Two Rabbinic Views of Christianity in the Middle Ages

**Asher Finkel
Jewish-Christian Studies Graduate Program
Department of Religion
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ**

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TWO RABBINIC VIEWS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Asher Finkel, Ph.D.

In the sessions of our section over the past decade, I introduced a significant distinction between two rabbinic attitudes in the Mediterranean countries during the Middle Ages of 12th and 13th centuries as to their view of Christianity. On one hand are the European rabbis of the Tosaphists, who live mainly in France and Germany and spoke their languages, and on the other hand are the rabbinic scholars, who lived in Islamic Spain, namely Maimonides. The Tosaphists were familiar with the Victorines and the great philosopher-theologian, Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, they faced the wrath of the antisemitic ravages of the Crusades that decimated Jewry of Europe. However, in given towns the rabbis and their community were protected and saved by learned bishops. The halakhic view of the Tosaphists determined that Christianity is not idolatry but a Noahidic oriented Biblical religion. In contrast, Jewry of the Islamic Spain and North African countries, including Egypt, Yemen and Arabia, accepted the halakhic position of Maimonides that determined Christianity to be idolatry. For he was conversant with the great works of Islamic philosophers and theologians, from which he gathered his depiction of Christian faith. The Quran itself views Christianity as idolatry, as related in Sura 2 (the cow) and Sura 112 (*Tawhid*). The latter preserved the very formulation of faith in God's unity that echoed the Biblical Shema declaration. As such, Maimonides viewed Islam to be theistic but Biblical Christianity as idolatrous. Even though, Islamic countries tolerated and protected their Jews, yet they remained subjugated to the category of Dhimmis, i.e. not free citizens nor equals to Muslims. In contrast the Jews in Christian lands shared the Bible but they faced the wrath of Christianity by the way the uneducated masses viewed them as Christ killers. This antisemitic charge is without historical attestation. For Luke's Gospel depicts the arrest and death of Jesus while the Jewish crowd and women cried and lamented as they witnessed his painful death by the Romans. He was brutally beaten as were other Jews who were placed on the crossed beams. Yet, a false view of popular Christianity led the Crusades to march first against Jews on the European continent before they reached the holy land. In the Third Crusade it was Saladin (c1138-1193) who held them back and Maimonides was then the trusted physician of Saladin.

The historical vagaries also added to the popular approach to Christianity and Islam on the Jewish tradition. Even unto contemporary time Jewish historians view Islam as more tolerant to Judaism than Christianity. They even embrace the notion that the theistic religion of Islam is akin to Jewish monotheism. However, the very Bible is viewed in Islam as a falsified text, since it betrays Muhammad's historical ignorance that Mary the mother of Jesus is also the sister of Aaron and Moses. Muhammad did not read any Biblical text, but only heard the Biblical stories from Jews and from his wife's cousin, who was a Christian. Yet, the zealotry of Islamic faith gained control of the Middle East unto the Spanish peninsula. While at the same period the Jews

of European countries lived in an atmosphere of zealous Christianity. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between the two approaches to Christianity by the rabbinic masters as they are rooted in the knowledge of viewing it from their own critical account of Halakhah.

Corresponding to the Halakhic determination, rabbinic Judaism is also guided by a theological view of history that relates to the eschatological development of history under God. For Jewry in exile awaits the messianic coming as they now face life among the nations that are in conflict, as captured in apocalyptic tradition, namely, the nations of Edom and nations of Islam. Edom represents the Roman empire that is viewed as a conflict between Esau and Jacob, whereas Ishmael from Hagar is in conflict with Jacob, the son of Isaac. These are the Biblical paradigmatic views that guide Israel in their historical awareness. Thus, their view of Islam and Christianity, as theistic religions will define how the encounter will be realized as the apocalyptic end.

Remarkably, the very same distinction emerged between the learned rabbis of European Christian countries and the great scholar Maimonides of the Islamic world. Maimonides' supreme halakhic compilation of Jewish laws in the Mishnah Torah incorporated the entire system as practiced in Temple time and after the Destruction. His view, therefore, pervaded throughout the Islamic world of Jewry and in particular was fully adopted by the Jews in Arabia and Yemen. His halakhic work incorporated the principles of theological philosophy and the historical development of monotheism as well as the ethical teachings with a guide to healthy life (note: Maimonides was also a physician), and in addition the account of proper liturgical and penitential praxis. Thus, he concluded his magnificent work with an eschatological-messianic presentation. In the uncensored text of his final account of "kings and their wars", he relates the coming of the Messiah (ch 11, 12), He writes: "The King Messiah will rise to restore the Davidic Kingdom to its original government. He will build the Temple and he will gather the dispersed Jews. All the laws will be reinforced as in the days of old... For anyone who does not believe in him or does not await his coming... he denies the very Torah of Moses our Master. For the Torah attests concerning him (Deut 30:33ff) "the Lord our God will restore you... even the very outcast ones... the Lord will bring them to the land." These words are explicitly in the Torah, as well as what was said by the Prophets. "Thereby, Maimonides describes the final conflict namely, as prophesied by Balaam (Num 24:17, 18). There will be two Messiahs one was David who saved Israel from their enemies and a final one who will save them from the descendants of Esau, i.e. Edom. Thus, he posited that the final conflict will be with Edom, i.e. Rome, namely the Christian world that faces Jewry in exile.

However, the European rabbis viewed the eschatological conflict differently, especially as preserved by the writings of Rabbi Eliyahu Gaon (1720-1797), who lived in the days of Napoleon. This rabbinic master was renowned to European Jewry as the final authority. He made his views known to Rabbi Rivlin in a treatise called "Qol Hator". The title is usually translated as "The Voice of the Turtledove"; however, it really points to the year "HaToR," in Hebrew count 5600, i.e. 1800 (the time of Napoleon). This work was recently published with an elaborate commentary by the great rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Menahem Kasher (1895-1983). In this work, the very conflict faces Israel and Christian world with the forces of Islam since the latter challenges the Biblical religions and preaches jihad for the conquest of the non-Islamic world. In the Islamic view the world is divided by "Dar el Salam" i.e. the geographical areas

where peace reigns among the Islamic states, and “Dar el Harb”, i.e. the geographical area facing the sword where Islam does not rule. Rabbi Kasher reviews what occurred in the recent past before Vatican II, that exhibited how in Christian Europe, the Jewish people faced annihilation. Now the shift occurred for the Jewish people who have returned to their land and set up their state. However, the entire Islamic world seeks to eliminate it, first by not recognizing the Jewish right to the land and their independence. Even the Temple mount is denied to the Jews, whose claim is historical and biblical, as verified by archeological findings. Moreover, their right to settle in Hebron, the city of the patriarchs, defies Islamic claim since Abraham is buried there with Isaac and his son Jacob who is Israel. What more evidence is needed to show that it belongs only to Israel but not to Ibrahim with his son Ishmael? Apparently, Elijah Gaon saw this final threat is not only to the Jewish people who lived in the land of Israel throughout the centuries but also it comes to challenge the final Biblical promise to the patriarchs, which cannot be ignored. The only theistic religion that denies the Biblical text is Islam with its Quran that never refers to Jerusalem and points to Sura of the flight (*Al-Isra*) as an oblique reference to the Temple mount. In light of this development, the very two centuries before the end of the Jewish count of 6000 years will be catastrophic as it leads to the seventh millennium of the Sabbath, the messianic age.

The Gaon of Vilna, Lithuania, viewed the eschatological development of history in contradistinction to the Maimonidean approach, even though the latter’s view indeed disclosed that European Jewry will face a holocaust, due to centuries of public anti-Semitic preaching and teaching in Christian countries. However, the current positive shift in Jewish-Christian relations is now fortified by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council declaration and the current popes. The only threat to the modern state of Israel, that absorbed the Jewish remnant of European countries after the Holocaust, is publicly declared by Arab countries. Jews who lived in the Islamic world over the centuries, for example Yemenite Jews from the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, were forced to leave or face death. Now Yemen is Judenrein as are most Arab countries. This development attests to the Gaon’s view, especially that he was the one who initiated the settlement of European Jewry in the land of Israel under the severe Ottoman rule. Apparently, the eschatological view of the Gaon in “*Qol Hator*” should be taken seriously, as we saw the Maimonidean view was confirmed by the aftermath of World War II in Christian Europe.

ASHER FINKEL
Seton Hall University