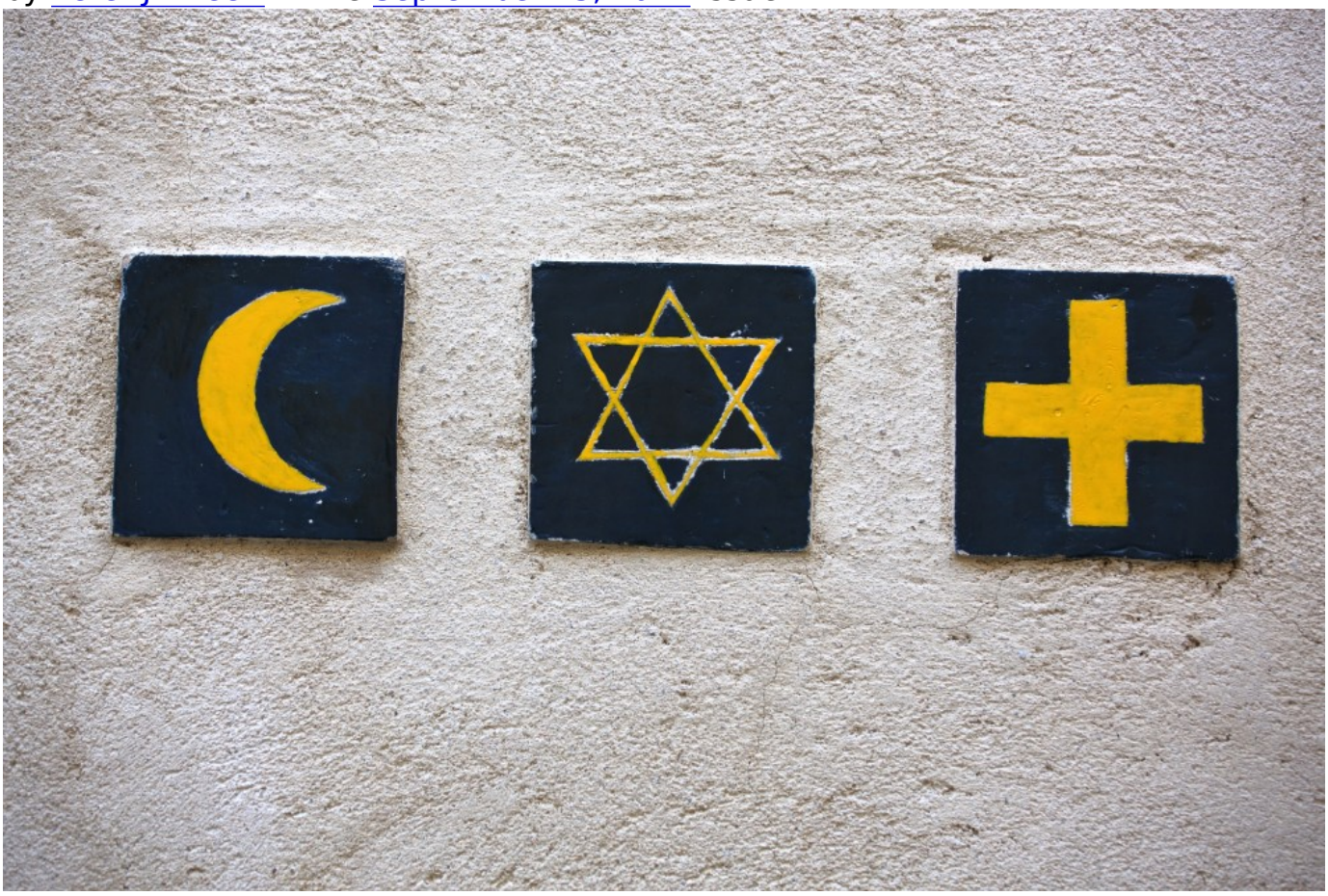
Inclusive, exclusive, or pluralistic?

A dialogue on Judaism in relation to other religions

by Peter J. Kreeft in the September 13, 2017 issue



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Thomas, a hard-headed, logical, nonreligious exclusivist, and Bea, an open-hearted, intuitive, religious inclusivist, are taking a class on world religions from Professor Fesser, a neutral, scholarly pluralist. The two students and the professor have a habit of meeting regularly after class for an informal discussion. They've just come from the class on Judaism.

Thomas: Well, Bea, what did you learn from that lecture?

Bea: Hmm. . . . I was about to answer, “Not much,” because I was already pretty familiar with Judaism. But then I suddenly realized that this course isn’t so much about knowing historical facts as it is about philosophical perspectives, and in that sense I learned a lot. I think the professor’s main aim is not just filling our heads with knowledge but inveigling us to look at the different religions of the world differently—to cock our heads to the side, so to speak.

Thomas: I think you’re right there, Bea. That’s a good way to put it. So, interpreting my question that way, let me ask it again: what did you learn?

Bea: The first thing that pops into my mind when I think of the Jews is something I find disturbing: their exclusivism. Both as a people and as a religious belief system. No people have kept their own distinctive identity as the Jews have. Maybe that’s the explanation for anti-Semitism: jealousy. The Jews are like a stone in the world’s stomach. It can’t digest them, and it can’t ignore them.

Thomas: That’s true. No people have resisted assimilation as much as they have. And no people have been less ecumenical toward other religions. They have the longest track record in history of refusing to believe other religions, refusing to worship other people’s gods. Their scriptures are full of God condemning that, more repeatedly and consistently than he condemns anything else. And even Jesus bought into that: he took the first of the Ten Commandments and called it the greatest one of all, “Thou shalt have no other gods.” And the Muslims have bought into it too: “No god but God.” That’s their primary prayer, the *shahada*.

So it looks like you’ve got a double problem there, Bea. First, as a Christian, you can’t disagree with Jesus, and second, since Jesus was a Jew, you can’t disagree with his Judaism, no matter how exclusivistic it seems. Not only can’t you be anti-Jewish, you have to be anti-gentile. The Jews are right and everybody else is wrong wherever they contradict the Jews.

Bea: No, I don’t have to be anti-gentile. Jesus opened the door to all the gentiles.

Thomas: Well, in a sense that’s historically true. That’s why Christians send out missionaries but Jews don’t. The Jews are still waiting for the Messiah. They believe that only when the Messiah comes will the whole world worship the true God.

Bea: But half the world does worship the true God now, the God of the Jews, and that’s because the Messiah did come, and he broke down the wall of separation

between Jews and gentiles. That's inclusivism, not exclusivism.

Thomas: No, you've still got a wall of exclusivism, it's just bigger. It surrounds not just Jews but Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who all worship the God of the Jews. The other half of the world is still wrong if they don't worship the God of the Jews. Jesus didn't abrogate the first commandment. He repeated it.

Bea: There's nothing in the Bible, Old Testament or New, about any other world religion except polytheism, worshiping many gods. That's condemned, that's excluded, yes. But that's pretty much dead today. All the major world religions are monotheistic. They agree with Jewish monotheism, even though they have very different perspectives on this one God.

Thomas: But some don't even use the word *God*.

Bea: So what? A God by any other name—or none—would smell as sweet.

Thomas: Our class was about Judaism, not inclusivism versus exclusivism, so let's talk about Judaism—something we can sink our teeth into and argue about.

Bea: OK, how about the explanation for the Jews' incredible achievements in history? Remember the professor's quotation—I forget where it was from—that the Jews refute every major law of history. Everybody wants to kill them, from pharaoh to Hitler, yet they've survived for 3,500 years. And they thrive. They're one of the smallest religions in the world—what is it, less than 1 percent of the world?—yet half the world now believes in their God. And it's a lot more likely that a doctor, lawyer, scientist, artist, comedian, novelist, publisher, musician, philosopher, or banker is a Jew than anything else. What's the cause for that?

Thomas: They have an answer: they're God's "chosen people." But you can't believe that if you're an inclusivist, right?

"How far does your inclusivism extend?" asked Thomas. "To all the world's religions?"

Bea: No, I don't think that necessarily follows. Because they don't mean by that that they're better than anybody else. Their scriptures explicitly say that. God tells them why he chose them: not because they were wiser or stronger or better—in fact he calls them "a stiff-necked people"—but just because he loved them. It's the humblest interpretation they could possibly put on the data of their miraculous

successes. It’s God’s doing, not theirs.

Thomas: Yet they’re still different, even if that’s God’s doing, not theirs. So it’s God who’s the exclusivist.

Bea: I don’t know what to say to that.

Professor Fesser: *(approaching)* Did I just hear a bit of Socratic humility from one of you?

Bea: That was me, Professor.

Thomas: I thought I was the Socratic one.

Bea: But I’m the humble one.

Thomas: And proud of it too, I see.

Fesser: I see nothing has changed in my absence: you’re still in each other’s hair. Sorry to be late again for our little informal class. So tell me, did you solve the problem we raised in class about whether Judaism is primarily a race, a culture, or a religion? Or about the problem of a special divine revelation to Jews—what theologians call “the scandal of particularity”?

Thomas: “How odd of God / to choose the Jews”—Hilaire Belloc, right?

Fesser: Yes. Although he didn’t mean it to be as anti-Semitic as it sounds.

Thomas: No, we didn’t solve those questions because we didn’t raise them yet.

Bea: So let’s raise them now.

Thomas: OK, let’s start with the professor’s question about whether Judaism is primarily a race, a culture, or a religion.

Bea: Well, Judaism can’t be primarily a racial thing because that would make them racists, right?

Thomas: I think you can guess what my next question is going to be, Bea.

Bea: Um, define my terms, right? OK, racism is the erroneous idea that your biological race is . . . is terribly important. And that yours is extra-special.

Thomas: Well, I guess that makes me a racist.

Bea: What? I'm shocked. Why?

Thomas: Because race is nothing but an extension of family. Both are based on the biology of reproduction, on blood, if you will. And family is terribly important, isn't it? Isn't "extra-special" loyalty and love to your family very important and very right?

Bea: I never thought of it that way.

Thomas: And isn't culture and cultural tradition an aspect of this extended family called race? Or, to put it the other way, isn't race an aspect of culture?

Bea: I guess so.

Thomas: And that's why tradition is so important for Jews. It's "all in the family"—family memories. It's their past, their roots, that gives them their identity.

Bea: True. But gentiles can become Jews too—proselytes.

Thomas: Yes, but that's the exception that proves the rule. It's like adoption. It doesn't change the essence of a family. Conversion to Judaism is like adoption: it's a legitimate door, but it's a back door, not the front door. The front door is procreation, reproduction. That's something racial.

Fesser: So, Thomas, you're reducing the three options to two then, in answering our question about race, culture, or religion. You're saying that Judaism is essentially either a racial and cultural thing or a religious thing. Is that what you're saying?

Thomas: I guess so. I'm saying that it's either natural or supernatural, since both race and culture are natural and religion—at least biblical Judaism—is supernatural.

Fesser: In that case, you're asking which person is *not* a Jew: the racial and cultural Jew who doesn't believe the Jewish religion, or the gentile who does.

Thomas: I guess so.

Fesser: But Christians fit that second category, don't they? Isn't that what St. Paul said in the New Testament? You're a child of Abraham not by being circumcised in your body but in your soul, in your heart. So according to Christianity, Christians are really Jews even if they're not racially Jewish because Judaism is essentially religious,

and Christians believe the religion of the Jews. But Jews don't call Christians a certain kind of Jew just because they believe Jewish theology and morality. The *Jewish* definition of a Jew is racial: a Jew is someone who has a Jewish mother. And even religiously, it's circumcision that initiates you into the religion, into the covenant with God, because God himself invented that covenant and that way of initiation into it.

Thomas: Right.

Fesser: And even if a Jew defines Judaism religiously, his definition of a Jew isn't like the Christian definition of a Christian: it's not whether you believe the theology and the morality. It's whether you practice it, whether you observe the Law. It's works, not faith. But according to the New Testament, Christianity is first of all faith.

Thomas: OK. So that question about what makes a Jew a Jew, according to Judaism, is answered. So what? How is that important for the larger question we keep coming back to, the question of comparative religions?

Fesser: I think the answer is that when you compare Judaism with Christianity, you're comparing apples with oranges. They're two different kinds of isms. They self-define differently.

Thomas: Right. So how does that help our debate between exclusivism and inclusivism?

Fesser: It makes both of those isms wrong.

Thomas: So pluralism is the only option left.

Fesser: *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

Thomas: But Judaism and Christianity contradict each other. You can't be a Jew if you accept Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah. So they're still exclusive, from the Jewish point of view anyway.

Fesser: Yes, that's the sticking point.

Bea: So exclusivism raises its ugly head again.

Fesser: Yes, but so does inclusivism. If a mystic heard what we said today, he wouldn't be convinced he was wrong either.

Bea: So all three isms are still on the table.

Fesser: Oh, of course they are. I didn't mean to take any of them off it. I just meant to put pluralism on the table too. Because that's the third option that neither of you were considering.

Bea: Professor, I'm still not clear about the answer to our original question about what kind of thing Judaism is. Is it essentially a culture that contains a religion or a religion that contains a culture?

Fesser: You would get different answers to that question from different Jews. So I can't give you a definitive answer. But I can give you another question: Why do you think that question is important, and not just for Jews?

Thomas: Because if it's essentially a religion, it makes absolute claims, and if it's a culture, it doesn't.

Fesser: Yes, that's a big difference philosophically. And why is that important religiously?

Thomas: Because if it's a religion, it's claiming a divine revelation, a way down from God, something that's infallible, if God is infallible. If not, not.

Fesser: What would you say if I challenged the implied premise of your argument: that all religions claim a divine revelation? Do Buddhism and Confucianism claim divine revelation?

Thomas: No. They're ways up, not ways down. But religious Jews do claim a divine revelation, a way down, don't they?

Fesser: Yes. And nonreligious Jews don't. They just claim a good and wise human tradition: something horizontal, not necessarily vertical.

Bea: But nonreligious Jews often still respect and practice parts of the Jewish religion. I know quite a few like that. They don't deny the whole vertical dimension. They're not all atheists.

Fesser: Yes, but insofar as they do believe in a vertical, insofar as they do reach up toward the divine, they see it as man's fallible search for God, not God's infallible revelation to man, as the Orthodox do.

Thomas: So non-Orthodox Jews would say that that's all Judaism is? Even the Law? Even the Ten Commandments?

Fesser: I think most Reform Jews would say that. And some Conservative Jews would, but I think most would not. And no Orthodox Jews would say that.

Thomas: That's an important difference.

Fesser: Why do you think it's important?

Thomas: Because it impacts the issue of comparative religions. Reform Jews can be inclusivists, but Orthodox Jews have to be exclusivists, I think.

Fesser: Why do you think they have to be exclusivists?

Thomas: Because they can't put their divine revelation on par with other religions if those other religions are merely human roads up the mountain. All human roads may be the same, or equal in value, but no human road up can be equal to a divine road down, if that's what they believe Judaism is.

Bea: Why couldn't there be many divine roads down?

"Comparing Christianity with Judaism," said the professor, "is like comparing apples and oranges."

Thomas: Because God never contradicts himself, and Judaism contradicts other religions. It did from the beginning, when God supposedly chose them and separated them from all the other tribes and told them not to worship any other gods. Jews were the least inclusive people in the world. That's why the Romans persecuted them—not because the Romans wouldn't tolerate the Jewish religion but because the Jews wouldn't tolerate the Roman religion. They wouldn't be ecumenical and inclusive and tolerant and just live and let live and worship Caesar as well as their own god, as all the other religions did. They were like the early Christians that way, and that's why they and the early Christians were the only ones the Romans persecuted: because they were exclusivists. Isn't that right, Professor?

Fesser: Yes; as far as I know those were the only two religions Rome did not tolerate. Politically, the Romans persecuted anyone who wouldn't swear allegiance to Caesar, whether the motive was religious or not. Rome's real religion was Rome.

Bea: But that doesn't prove whether exclusivism or inclusivism is *true*.

Thomas: Of course not. But it shows the inconsistency of your position, Bea. You're a Christian, yet you're an inclusivist. You would have burned incense to Caesar if you had to, and all the other early Christians would have called you an apostate for being an inclusivist. That proves that you can't be a Christian and an inclusivist.

Bea: It proves no such thing.

Thomas: Why not?

Bea: Because if you look at the inner content of these two religions instead of the attitude that Rome took to them, you see that what's distinctive about religious Judaism, as well as the Christianity that came from it, was its inclusivism, its universalism.

Look at the main distinctive religious ideas in Judaism: they're all inclusivist, universalist ideas. There's only one God for the whole world, not many. And this God created the whole world and all people. They're all his children, made in his image. And this God is the final end of all people too: there's only one heaven for everybody. And this God revealed the Ten Commandments for everybody, not just for the Jews, although their ceremonial laws and their civil laws are just for them. And this God demands personal holiness and personal justice of every individual, gentile as well as Jew. That's—what? Five? Six?

Thomas: Five.

Bea: Five distinctively Jewish religious ideas. And they're all universalist ideas. They're the chosen people only because they're chosen to remind the whole world of the one universal truth.

Thomas: But other religions deny that universal truth.

Bea: No, they don't; they just have different versions of it.

Thomas: OK, here are three examples. Number one: Hindus and some Buddhists worship many gods. Number two: they don't believe that God created the universe out of nothing. Number three: they don't believe that God is a person with a will who gives moral commandments.

Fesser: Good choice, Thomas. Those are three of the main ideas that apparently separate Judaism from Eastern religions. What do you make of them, Bea? How do you see them as not contradicting Eastern religions?

Bea: The first one is easy. All religions are monotheistic. The many gods are just masks for the One. And the second one is just technical. All religions see the One as the source of the many; they just use different images for it. The West uses the image of a craftsman or an artist making things outside of himself, and the East uses the image of a dreamer dreaming things inside himself. And the third one—what was your third one, Thomas?

Thomas: Moral commandments.

Bea: Oh, yes. That's the easiest one of all: all religions have the same moral laws. Morality is the strongest case for inclusivism. It's much more obviously the same across different religions than theology is.

Thomas: But it doesn't come from God in Eastern religions.

Bea: But even Eastern religions don't *deny* that it comes from God. They're not atheistic about God, they're just agnostic.

Thomas: But they say God is not a person with a moral will, so morality doesn't go "all the way up."

Bea: In a sense it *does*, because it's absolute, so it's grounded in the one absolute, however you conceive that absolute: He, She, It, or Them. It's just that the theological images for the absolute are different in the East. They're less personal.

Thomas: Well, why isn't *that* a contradiction to Western theology?

Bea: Because in Western theology, too, God is not *just* a person, or three persons, but also a single divine nature or substance or essence or however they label it. We have to have some image in our mind to understand him, so in the Bible he's imaged as a kind of supernatural person. The East doesn't use that image. But that's not a contradiction, because different images don't exclude each other, as two contradictory *ideas* do. They can complement each other.

I don't need to be an inclusivist about imagery; I don't need to insist that everyone use the same image for God. I'm an inclusivist only about the substance, the

essence. And the substance transcends the images. *Both* sides say that, by the way: that what God really is transcends all of our images. That's why Western religions are forbidden to make or worship images. And I take that to mean word images as well as graven images.

Fesser: That's a good defense of inclusivism, Bea. And you have a strong argument for exclusivism, Thomas.

Thomas: And that's why you choose pluralism? Because both of us have equally good arguments?

Fesser: That can be one reason, yes.

Thomas: I still think my arguments outweigh yours, Bea.

Bea: Why?

Thomas: Because I've made a positive case; all you've done is defend your inclusivism against it. You haven't proved your side positively.

Bea: So go read Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* or Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*.

Thomas: But religious Jews have always been exclusivists, throughout their history, as Hindus have always been religious inclusivists. There's certainly a contradiction *there*. You can't be inclusivist about inclusivism versus exclusivism. And since Hinduism is inclusivism and Judaism is exclusivism, you can't be inclusivist about Judaism and Hinduism, or Judaism and Buddhism.

Bea: By the way, I know quite a few Jews who are very interested in Buddhism. I wonder why that is.

Thomas: Oh, I've got an answer to that. Jews have to take the commandments very seriously because they're God's commandments. And they're commanded: love your neighbor as yourself. And that's hard to do. Buddhism tells us that there is no self! So it lets us off the hook.

Bea: Are you serious?

Thomas: Of course not. That's a Jewish joke.

Bea: Oh.

Thomas: But back to our point: Jews aren't inclusive to gentiles, even though gentiles might be inclusive to Jews. Religiously, I mean. Take Jews and Hindus. Hindus are inclusive to Jews—they'd probably classify Judaism as another yoga path up the one mountain—but Jews aren't inclusive to Hindus. They're not part of the covenant. They're uncircumcised.

Bea: You're arguing about attitudes to people now, Thomas. That's psychology, not theology.

"I don't insist that people use the same images," said Bea. "I'm inclusivist only about the essence."

Thomas: Fine. Let's argue about theology. Hindus see Judaism as another form of Hinduism, but Jews don't see Hinduism as another form of Judaism. So whoever's right there, whether the Hindu inclusivists or the Jewish exclusivists, they contradict each other. Whether or not exclusivism is true between Jews and Hindus, it's certainly true between exclusivists and inclusivists. And since Jews are exclusivists and Hindus are inclusivists, exclusivism is true between Jews and Hindus. Unless the law of noncontradiction is untrue. And if that's untrue, then we *can* contradict ourselves, so we can say that if it's untrue, then it's true. So it's true either way.

Bea: That's very clever, Thomas, but it's not religion. You sound like a very clever kid using a computer.

Thomas: A minute ago you complained that my argument was psychology instead of logic, and now you complain that it's logic instead of psychology. No matter what I say, I can't please you. Is that a woman's privilege?

Bea: So now we're getting sexist and chauvinistic!

Fesser: Uh—hey, troops, we're supposed to be all on the same side, fighting ignorance instead of each other. Can we get back to the issues instead of the personal insults?

Bea and Thomas: Sorry.

Thomas: Bea, let me ask a question that's both logical and personal. That's OK, right? Because you'd say your inclusivism is both a philosophy and a personal

attitude, right?

Bea: Right.

Thomas: So my question is this: As a Christian, how far does your inclusivism extend? To Jews, of course, because Jesus was a Jew. And to Hinduism too, right? And all the religions of the world in some way?

Bea: Yes, exactly: “in some way.”

Thomas: What about Satanism, then? In what way do you as a worshiper of Christ accept the religion that worships the Antichrist?

Bea: No, of course I have to draw the line there.

Thomas: So you do draw lines.

Bea: Of course.

Thomas: So you are an exclusivist, then. You’re just not as narrow an exclusivist as I am.

Bea: You could put it that way, I guess.

Thomas: So the only question that divides us then is not whether you draw lines, but where? And why?

Bea: I’m sure there’s a good answer to that question, Thomas. But I’m not sure I could give it to you on the spot. I’ll have to think more about that.

Thomas: That was what I said at the end of last week’s conversation. Maybe we’re both learning Socrates’s lesson one, that we both know less than we think we do. What do you think about that, Professor?

Fesser: I think that you two are both really good teachers to each other. So I think that therefore maybe you don’t need me as much as you think you do.

Bea: Well, maybe today, anyway. We seem to be all talked out for today, even though we didn’t convince each other. Probably we never will.

Fesser: And that fact might be another good argument for pluralism.

Thomas: You're *assuming* it's a fact that we never will, Professor. But I'm not convinced it is.

Fesser: Good for you, Thomas. Question authority, especially the authority of professors.

Peter Kreeft teaches philosophy at Boston College. This article is excerpted from Between One Faith and Another *by Peter Kreeft. Copyright (c) 2017 by Peter J. Kreeft. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426. www.ivpress.com*

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