

Orthodox to Radical Judaism and What Is In Between

Who (besides Jews) knew that there were so many different branches within Judaism? What makes a Jew, a Jew? On one extreme, we have the Orthodox Jews who believe that God gave Moses the Torah directly on Mount Sinai, and on the other extreme we have “secular” Jews, who believe in Jewish ethics and some practices, but do not believe in God at all. Monotheistic and Atheistic Jews both consider themselves Jewish in the enormous spectrum of Judaism in between. In *An Introduction to Judaism*, Nicholas De Lange says, “Jews today are more deeply divided than at any time in the past on the theory and practice of their religion”(67).

The three largest types of Judaism is Orthodoxy, Conservative, and Reform, or “liberal.” Orthodoxy is a term borrowed from Christian theology dubbed by reformers to “new conservatist Jews” (De Lange 74). Orthodox Jews have taken rituals from the Torah and the past and have put them into set ways, however, Judaism continues to grow today. Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructive Jews have been renewing a lot of the ideas and rituals to fit our time, continuing to participate in practices in which they feel are relevant today.

On the life after death topic, Jewish concepts pertaining to this have changed throughout the ages and have also differed among the various types of Judaism. Jews, as a whole, do not believe in original sin, nor do they believe in the concept of salvation. The concept of hell and purgatory as an actual place is not firmly established in the Jewish tradition. Some Jewish authorities say that they believe that the soul *is* in fact “eternal” and that they will be rewarded for living good lives in the next life. Jewish scriptures refer to a resting place called *Sheol*. Noted below is an excerpt of scripture from the Hebrew Bible on Sheol.

Psalms Chapter 18 תהלים

6 The cords of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of Death confronted me.

חֲבֵלֵי שְׂאוֹל סָבְבוּנִי קִדְמוֹנֵי מוֹקְשֵׁי מוֹת

The word *Sheol* is referred to as “the grave” in the King James version of the Bible (Genesis 37:35). Sheol, however can be described as other things as well depending on whom is asked. With the belief of an afterlife also comes the belief of a Messiah, or messianic era that will bring in a time of peace, justice, and redemption. Orthodox Jews believe that there will actually be a physical and personal Messiah, whereas Reform, and even some Conservative Jews believe that there will be a time where the “people” will change the world.

Orthodox Jews like to claim that they are keeping the main stream of authentic Judaism flowing from ancient times, which makes it difficult for leaders in Orthodox Judaism to guide movement to new areas. Today, Orthodoxy is in somewhat of a disarray because of the uncertainty of whether they are essentially a conservative, but modernizing movement, or whether they are a progressive, but traditional movement. Orthodox Judaism is seemingly in between traditionalism and modernism. Orthodox Judaism allies itself with traditionalists (who have also come to be termed as “ultra-Orthodox”) but is conscious of the competition, for members, with more progressive movements than themselves.

Halachah, in Hebrew, means “walk” or “go” and is best understood as the “way” in which people should go. Halachah is a moral and ritual code of commandments that was created by the Pharisees. Halachah is how someone should direct themselves ethically and ritually, and eventually came to direct every part of someone's life from the moment they woke up to the moment they rested at night. In Judaism, (in the very, least Orthodox Judaism) every aspect of life is religious. Nothing in the world is outside of religious judgment or concern.

Many non-traditionalist Jews do not view the Torah as accurate history, but view it as religious literature with historical narratives, legends, laws, ethics, and accounts of how Judaism began. A

modern Jew is not concerned about the historical accuracy of the Torah. In the book *Jews and Mormons, Two Houses of Israel*, Rabbi William J. Leffler says, “Whether the books of Exodus and Genesis are factual accounts of the events they report is of lesser importance to us as a people of faith than the spiritual insights and lessons they convey.”(6)

Traditionalists and modernists often practice differently, and if they do practice similarly, it is with different moods and intentions. Traditional Jews take their rituals very seriously, and rituals to Modernist Jews merit respect, but are, “only as a conscientious workman respects his important tools,” as Rabbi Milton Steinberg says in *Basic Judaism* (140). Modernist Jews ask questions that traditionalists do not think are important to think about:

Why did a particular ritual come into being to begin with? What purpose did it fulfill then? Does it serve any worthwhile end nowadays? Could it do its job more effectively were it modified? Or has it so lost relevance and effectiveness that it may just as well be dropped out altogether (Steinberg 140)?

In the nineteenth century there was some debate on prayer in the vernacular, the introduction of sermons, music, the shortening of service, and the decorum of the worshipers. The first, true reformed congregation was the *New Israelite Temple Association*, set up in 1817 in Hamburg, Germany. In this new reform there was much decorum, an introduction of choral and organ music, prayers in German, and even a German sermon. The reforms were condemned by the *beth din* (the rabbinic court), but that did not stop imitation of the reforms in other places.

There was not an agreement on how far or how fast to proceed with reforming Judaism. There were a variety of formulations ranging from the extreme theological conservatism of Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-88) to the extreme liberalism of Samuel Holdheim (1806-60) and Abraham Geiger (1810-74). All of these three rabbis studied both the Talmud and a secular university of education. Much of the arguments were on how far was permissible to allow the values of surrounding culture and society to pervade Traditional Judaism.

Holdheim came from a background that had been nearly untouched by modern trends; he had

even received a traditional education on the Talmud. Holdheim figured that the changing of times required a change in the law, even if that law is considered to be of divine origin. Holdheim went further than other reformers when he changed the day of the *Shabbat* services in his Berlin Temple from Saturday to Sunday. He abolished several traditional Jewish festivals and officiated marriages between Jews and Gentiles (something considered taboo in Traditional Judaism). Holdheim was willing to abandon many religious practices; he believed that it was the beliefs and ethics of Judaism that were most important.

Geiger's ideas were similar to Holdheim's in many ways. Geiger believed in progression, that the Bible and Talmud are earlier, primitive stages in revelation that is still ongoing today. Geiger argued that ethics, and not necessarily rituals was the law of God. In this sense, Geiger did not profess the ritual of circumcision in male infants eight days after birth as traditional, and historical Judaism does. Geiger believed in the need to “dethrone the Talmud” (De Lange 73). Geiger supported a critical study of the Bible and wanted to extend a more critical approach of studying Talmudic literature as well.

Hirsch's idea of reformation was completely different from Holdheim and Geiger's. Hirsch's reforms often brought animosity towards him even from members of his own congregation in Moravia. Hirsch did not allow attempts to displace the traditional Talmudic role. He did not approve of biblical criticism and did not believe in the overuse of what other reformers were stating as “progress”.

Hirsch believed that it was the Jews, *not* Judaism that were in need of reformation. He hoped that through education there would be a better understanding of Judaism, making radical reforms unnecessary. The tension between Hirsch and Geiger was as confrontational as the tension between traditionalists and modernists. Hirsch was also firm in his opposition against Zecharias Frankel (1801-75) who was a very conservative modernist who was himself in stark disagreement with what he termed as, “negative reform leading to complete dissolution”(De Lange 73). Hirsch could be considered the founder of modern Orthodox Judaism. He became rabbi of the Adass Yeshurun congregation in 1851, held in Frankfurt am Main. Hirsch held this position for thirty-seven years,

during which time he transformed his small synagogue into the forefront of the new movement.

The first Reform congregation in America was set in Charleston, South Carolina in 1825, at that time there were roughly, only 5,000 Jews in America. By 1875, that number had increased to a quarter million. In 1842, a group of immigrants founded a reform congregation in Baltimore, and three years later the creation of the Congregation Emanu-El in New York. Within a decade, this synagogue had grown to seating a thousand members where men and women sat together (a practice that had not yet been established in Europe). This congregation had a decorous worship, a mixed choir, and even its own prayer book created by the rabbi and leader of the congregation, Leo Merzbacher. Ironically, Merzbacher had come from Europe with a certificate of Talmudic competence signed by Moses Sofer, a great opponent of modernism.

Today Reform Judaism claims to be the largest of the three Jewish movements in the U.S. The American Reform is the most radical of the three movements in Judaism. Outside of the U.S., Reform Jews are a minority and also tend to be not as radical as their American brothers. Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) is thought to be the architect of the American Reform; but in saying so, Wise never abandoned his belief that the Torah was given to Moses directly by God. Wise believed in the many opportunities for Jews to combine their loyalty to their country and their religion.

Altogether, Judaism has grown, changed, and branched off significantly since its inception, though there was definitely more of a dramatic change to Judaism beginning in the 1900s. Judaism may not be growing much in numbers, but the branches of Judaism are. Many of these reforms have been founded by the children of traditional parents whom are moving forward towards Reform Judaism. The similarity between the different branches in Judaism, compared to the different organized churches in Christianity is quite interesting.

What many Christians probably do not realize is just how many different organized types of congregations there are in Judaism. As somewhat of a vague example, the difference between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, could possibly be compared to Christians in an Amish tradition, to those in a

protestant type religion, such as Baptist. However, in any form of Judaism, the branch of Judaism someone belongs to, does not change the fact that this person is a Jew. If a person is born to a Jewish parent, (traditionally if the mother is a Jew) they are always a Jew, whether they are practicing, or whether they are not. Each Jew is free to choose the ideas that they find that are most comfortable and relevant to their lives. Unlike the Pope, in Catholicism, or the Prophet, in Mormonism, Judaism has no central authority defining acceptable beliefs.

The many branches of Christianity definitely have their own ideas of how to do things, and the way that things work as well as in Judaism, but will each consider themselves true Christians, and sometimes having prejudice against other Christians, such as the prejudice towards The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as not being true Christians, or not being Christians at all.

The three, main forms of Judaism, still believe in one, beneficent God. They believe in the authority of their scriptures, and they all maintain institutions of the synagogue and the rabbinate. Whether a Messiah, or a Messianic Era is coming in the future is the belief of one Jew to the next. Whether there is an actual dwelling of hell, heaven, or purgatory, or if the final resting place is a place called Sheol, we will all just have to wait and see for ourselves.

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