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**OUTSIDERS: IDENTITY AND INTOLERANCE IN MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS,
SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

by

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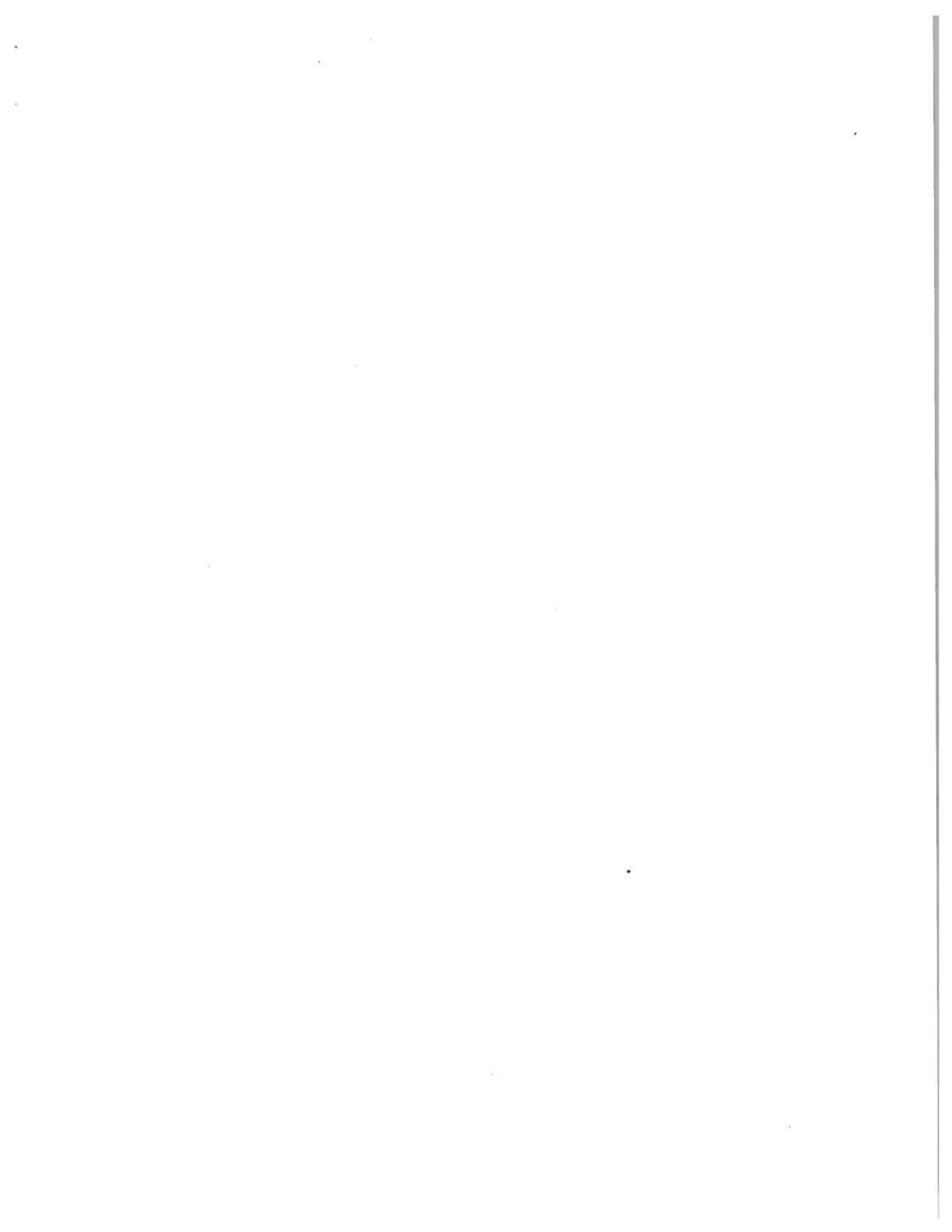
1.1 Mundo vult decipi. The Latin adage fits particularly well this flourishing but often unhealthy outgrowth of both comparative religion and liberal theologies, variously labelled "ecumenical studies", "understanding among religions", or similar phrases. In other words, wishful thinking too often seems to be the rule of the game.

It is less fashionable, but perhaps more useful, to analyse the conditions under which religious intolerance can emerge and thrive. After all, the rejection of the other may be an inherent temptation of the human psyche, but on historical terms it is far from coinciding with religion. Most of the polytheisms of classical Antiquity, for instance, do not appear to be exclusive of other religious identities.

The following pages, which purport to offer only some preliminary remarks towards this goal, will focus on monotheistic systems.

1.2 The obvious and the essential should be stated first, lest it be blurred in the discussion. Identity, personal and collective, is best defined through the other—in social terms, the outsider—who provides the clearest of boundaries.

The role of the outsider in the crystallization of collective identity is not only a negative and passive one. Any identity formation needs to posit the outsider, and to invest him with various qualities. This role is also in constant evolution, ⁱⁿ parallel to shifts in the perception of identity.



In this context, a sadly recurrent pattern in societies is provided by the demonization of the outsider, a phenomenon which has been shown to function in various cases as a crystallizer for social identity.

1.3 In the world of Antiquity, where ethnic and cultural identities often coincided with religious ones, Judaism appeared prima facie to conform to known patterns. Already at the time of the Exile, the religion of Israel represented the clearest element of national identity since both Hebrew language and the Land of Israel could not offer permanent frames for communal life.

In Greek eyes, at least, ethnic and cultural boundaries coincided with religious boundaries among Eastern peoples. Judaism was thus perceived to be synonymous with Jewish identity, just as Egyptian religion or Zoroastrianism were synonymous with Egyptian or Iranian identity.

1.4 These perceptions, however, were to evolve in very deep ways in the Hellenistic oikouménè, and later in the Roman Empire, where the major criteria of identity became linguistic and cultural. The outsiders, the barbaroi, were simply those who did not partake in Greek culture. In such a world, religion ceased to be central ^{for} ~~in~~ the definition of identity. The Jews began to be perceived as a particularly puzzling group precisely when it became clear that they could integrate Hellenistic culture perfectly well while continuing to insist on religion as the crucial criterion of identity. One thus had to acknowledge that Judaism was a religion of a new type, otherwise unknown in the ancient

Near East. Indeed, Judaism was not primordially a matter of tradition or ritual, but a matter of truth. Implicit in the claim of God's unity and unicity lies the conception of a univalent truth. This univalence, in its turn, implies that diverg^{ing} views be identified as false. In a society ruled by such a conception, outsiders may soon be branded as infidels, and dissenters as heretics.

1.5 This is not the place to analyse the implications of this radical idea, that religion is above all a matter of truth. Suffice it to note that it was to change the world, through the development of a new category, religious thought, or theology. In any case, one should at least emphasize here this major fact: the collision between the definition of identity as religious and the idea of religious truth entails the birth and growth of religious intolerance of the other, the outsider from a religious point of view, be he unbeliever from without or heretic, dissenter from within.

2.1 It is only through Christianity, however, that the potential for religious intolerance present in nuce in Jewish monotheism became fully crystallized. Paradoxically enough, it was the Jews who became its main victims, throughout the Middle Ages and up to the modern period.

This crystallization took place in Late Antiquity, already with the first polemics (Auseinandersetzungen) of Christianity with Judaism and Gnosticism. This period also saw the political victory of Christianity in the Roman Empire, and hence its ability to enact religious intolerance.

by law and/or force. Hence the crucial importance of the early Christian centuries, on which the following remarks will focus, for the establishment of basic patterns of thought and behaviour in the Western world.

2.2 Already in Paul's thought, Christianity is characterized by its attempt to take part in the identity which was previously that of the Jewish people. The Christians can now join the polity of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-19); or else, Paul argues that the old frames of identity through which Israel defined itself are not valid anymore (Colossians 3:11).

In their majority, the Jews rejected the Christian message, and this rejection brought the Christians to attempt nothing less than a reappropriation of the Jewish heritage and of Jewish identity: if they were excluded from Israel, they would define it in a new way, and would identify themselves with the new, or true Israel (Verus Israel).

In some respects, therefore, one can speak of Early Christianity as of a "neo-Judaism": whereas Judaism, after Jabne, undergoes a process of democratization, Early Christianity emphasizes hierarchical structures inherited from second Temple Judaism (after they have been transformed through a process of spiritualization): the ideas of the Temple, of sacrifice, of priesthood, which have disappeared from rabbinic Judaism, are present in the early Church.

2.3 One should take notice of the Jewish-Christians, whose continued existence - for much longer than has usually been thought - shows that the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity were not always easy

to draw. Jewish-Christianity should precisely be understood as an issue of identity: the term refers to those Jews who believed in the Messiahship of Jesus without willing to give up their Jewish identity (Origen notes about them that they want to be both Jews and Christians, but end up being neither Jews nor Christians).

On the other side of the spectrum of possible Christian identities and their relationship to Verus Israel, Marcion (as well as most Gnostic trends in the second century) expresses the paroxysm of the early Christian occultation of Judaism, which attempts to cut out Christianity, the new dispensation, from any link with Israel and with the God of Israel, the demiurge of lower rank which had offered the Torah.

In the mid-second century, a Justin Martyr rejects Judaism and dualist trends in the same movement, by arguing that it is precisely Jewish law, with its non universalist ethics, which is responsible for the appearance of Marcion. The importance of the ethical moment in Justin Martyr's religious thought, which is representative of second century Christian theology, cannot be overrated. Yet, it should be noted that it is not to the Jewish Law per se that Justin objects, but to the idea that the commandments given to Israel have, in themselves, a salvific value. Hence, Justin tolerates, on the side of the Jewish Christians, the continued practice of the biblical injunctions, if it is not presented as a condition of salvation. His opposition to antinomianism remains much more radical.

2.4 Such a tolerant attitude towards Judaism or Jewish practice, however, will not remain the rule for a long time. From the second to

the fourth century, one witnesses a progressive demonization of the Jews in Christian thought. This process happens precisely during the time that other religious groups towards which Christianity had a deep animosity (pagans and gnostics) disappear as serious threats to a growing and self-confident Christianity.

Indeed, any definition of - or search for - identity implies alterity, an other which can be opposed, and through whose opposition the border can be drawn which defines identity. Since the Christians define themselves very soon as a tertium genus (triton genus, i.e. neither Greeks nor Jews) and thus give up all usual, objective criteria which normally define a people (language, territory, clothing, food habits...), only the categories of truth and error remain through which identity may be defined. Hence the major importance of heresies in early Christian history. As a result of this process, in the fourth century, with the transformation of the Empire after Constantine's conversion, the attitude towards the Jews is more and more virulent. Towards the end of the century, John Chrysostom, in Antioch, expresses for the first time these radical attitudes which will become typical of the Middle Ages.

2.5 Parallely, in the first Christian centuries, the image of the Christian in Jewish consciousness becomes stereotyped and identified to that of Rome (Edom). The rabbis practice the occultation of heretics (minim) through silence, a method which may have been particularly effective but remains very frustrating for the historian. There is however no doubt that the Jewish-Christians were among those fought against fiercely by the Rabbis.

Rather than using the traditional filial metaphor, it should be stressed that Judaism and Christianity could be considered, throughout this period, to be sister religions, which crystallized their religious structures and their religious identities in rather parallel ways, although in very different language. This symmetry, and also this closeness, is best seen in their rather similar attitudes versus Roman paganism. This closeness remained hidden: throughout Late Antiquity, the Jews offered a serious religious challenge to Christians. Judaism remained not only alive during this period, but striving, and even reaching out, as the phenomenon of the Judaizantes (even in the Antioch of John Chrysostom) testifies.

One should add that although in principle the relationship of Judaism to Christianity should be very different, since Judaism is in no need of Christianity for its own definition, in practice the situation often offers parallel attitudes. For Jews, the existence of Christianity - of a thriving Christianity - was a challenge that was often recognized, sometimes confronted.

2.6 During the first few centuries, Christianity exemplifies a transformation of identity from ethnic (when it still was a Jewish sect), into cultural (at the time when it was religio illicita in the Roman Empire), and then, at last, into religious (in the fourth century).

This same fourth century witnesses the birth and establishment of religious intolerance, a phenomenon unknown in the pagan empire. (Christianity, being a Weltanschauung, or an ideology, is neither a culture nor an ethnos.) The Other becomes identified to the religious

Other. The Jew, being both an outsider to Christian society and justifying its existence (no Christianity without vetus Israel, after the rejection of the Marcionite temptation) becomes thus the Other par excellence in a society turned Christian.

3.1 The mutation of religious structures and of the frames of identity in the first Christian centuries, which explains the birth of religious intolerance in Late Antiquity, was to have a very deep impact, and not only within Christianity. It is not irrelevant to note here that when Islam arose, it was perceived in the Christian East as a new heresy, and Muhammad as a false prophet. In the Qur'an itself, one finds traces of the close links between the first strata of Islam and various heretical trends in Eastern Christianity and even Jewish Christianity. Indeed, two major trends in Early Islam deal with the problem of prophecy that is to say of religious truth, and of religious identity.

3.2 The early Islamic identification with the "People of the Book", i.e. a nation to which true prophets have been sent, is the root of the primitive universalism which pervades the early parts of the Qur'an. According to this conception, monotheistic religions are essentially one. It is in defiance of paganism that Muhammad began his career, but this stand soon shifted, when Jewish refusal to join the new movement became clear and final. Hence the ambiguity towards Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an, which exhibits two diametrically opposed views towards non-Muslims.

Islamic universalism offers a parallel to Christian ecumenism.

The Christians were proponents of a new kind of religion, that was neither that of the Jews or of the Greeks, but which they called proudly philosophia barbarum, barbarian wisdom. Religious identity had broken cultural frames in order to be offered to all human beings: anima naturaliter christiana: in its nature, the soul is Christian.

Yet the price of this conception was very heavy: salvation was not possible outside the church: extra ecclesiam nulla salus. This conception became enforced by the secular arm after the fourth century.

Similar attitudes developed in Islam, in some ways more radically since Islam never experienced the very deep ambiguity towards the state that is characteristic of Christianity. Outside the territory in which Islam was in power (dār el-Islām) lie enemy territories, into which war should be conducted in order to establish Islam (dār el-harb).

A religion that claims to be good for everybody does not accept easily being rejected by anyone.

3.3 In some ways, however, it may be claimed that it is precisely the Islamic lack of ambiguity towards political power and military strength that permitted the development of some kind of toleration of non-Muslims under Islamic yoke. A power that does not feel threatened can tolerate difference or divergence. Moreover, the fact that Christianity came to political power without being able or willing to interpret religion in political terms prevented it from developing a political philosophy like Muslim thinkers did. Hence, it remained unable to refer seriously to religious minorities. In Islam, on the

other hand, was soon developed the conception of tolerated religious minorities, ahl el-kitāb, the people of the book, who had received a true prophecy. This included first Jews and Christians, but with the Islamic conquests, Muslims came into contact with more peoples and civilizations, and it was enlarged to include even members of dualist religions, such as the Gnostic Sabians in Mesopotamia or the Zoroastrians of Iran. The basic law about ahl el-kitāb provides tolerance under a lower religious and legal status and the payment of a special tax, the jizya.

4.1 The accent has been put on parallelisms between Christianity and Islam. In terms of religious structures, no less deep similarities are to be found between Judaism and Islam, but these are on a different level (that of the status of religious law, halakha and shari^ca) and do not bear directly on the problem of religious intolerance.

Indeed, since Judaism had given up its universalist pretensions with the loss of Jewish political independence, it could more easily reckon with the other than its more successful heirs. Either barely tolerated or persecuted, the Jews had to remain on the defensive, and Jewish attitudes towards Christianity and Islam are often either implicit (in religious law) or meant only for internal consumption.

The most important factor for understanding Jewish attitudes towards Christianity and Islam lies probably with this insecure and humiliated position of the Jews under Christian and Islamic yoke: such a position could in no way favour understanding or openness. There

is no doubt that antisemitism has left deep scars on Jewish psyche and hence on Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles (goyim). It should be pointed out, however, that on both theological and psychological terms, Christianity offered much more serious problems for Jews than Islam.

4.2 The basic tension between universalistic pretensions and the need to develop rigorous, sharp definitions of frontiers is found in all monotheistic religions.

Since Judaism was forced by historical fate to coil up, this tension was transformed into that between the two sides of the Divinity: the God of Israel versus the Creator of the Universe. This tension runs parallel, in some ways, to that exemplified by the Gnostic temptation in early Christianity.

Renunciation of universalism, however, permitted the development, within Judaism, of a clear place for Gentiles in the "economy of salvation". Those among them who practice the Noahide laws (sheva mitzwot benei Noah) are justified entirely in the eyes of God, and can be considered "just among the Nations" (hassidei oumot haⁱⁿ colam). It should be pointed out that these two conceptions are slightly different in the sources, where the first refers more to human groups and the second only to individuals, but it would seem that they soon became functionally similar in Jewish consciousness.

The Noahide Laws are very different from the Stoic conception of Natural Law (nomos physikos), according to which all human beings must and can regulate their conduct, a conception which Paul picked up (Romans 1) and to which he gave religious connotations (the natural

worship of God). Yet they seem to function in Judaism somewhat similarly to Natural Law in Christianity: as legitimizing foreign religious and ethical attitudes.

It is impossible here to analyze these Noahide Laws (Law of adjudication, of blasphemy, of idolatry, of homicide, of sexual relations, of robbery, of the torn limb) and their theory, from Aggadic speculation to medieval philosophy. Let us only point out that they seem to represent a Grenzbegriff (to use the Kantian term) of Judaism, and that for rationalists, especially for Maimonides, they represent the only means based on rabbinic tradition for a consistent and realistic standard for judging and dealing with the non-Jewish world (D. Novak). It should at the same time be emphasized, however, that the belief in a common descent and an equal reward for all righteous men was often easier to maintain in theory than in practice (J. Baskin).

4.3 A major factor for understanding the development of the deeply ambivalent attitude to Gentiles in classical Judaism is the idea of closeness of the Jewish people. Whether this election, by God, is de jure or de facto, referring to a mythical Israel (Knesset Israel) rather than to the concrete people hic et nunc can and should be discussed. What should be emphasized, in any case, is the fact that Judaism conceives of election as mainly collective, while it remains individual in Christianity and in Islam. This Jewish conception, which runs parallel to the Jewish lack of universalism, at once permits the development of religious tolerance and imposes on it very strict limitations. Although the idea of closeness belongs to the religious sphere,

it seems to have survived the deep secularization processes which have swept the Jewish people since the late eighteenth century. This fact is explained by the almost total identity, underlined above, between Jewish national and religious identity.

4.4 It may be considered a particularly dirty trick of Reason (List der Vernunft), to use the Hegelian term, that the modern era, which has seen the breaking down of religious structures of thought and behaviour, especially in Christian Europe, did not blur, but on the contrary set loose hatred for the outsider (and in particular the Jew, the foreigner within) which was developed but also maintained under control of religious legislation. European secularization processes culminated, for our particular purpose, with the emergence of Jewish secular nationalism, especially Zionism, and violent mass antisemitism. The Jewish European tragedy brought to the renewal of a profound mistrust of the goyim, and reversion from Christianity, inherited from religious tradition.

It is only most recently, as a by-product of the Palestinian tragedy, that violently negative attitudes towards Arabs in Israel have sought grounding in traditional religious attitudes of intolerance for the stranger in the Promised Land. Indeed, we face now a new stage of Jewish history: the return to political power seems to have set loose all these dangerous temptations from which Jews may have deluded themselves to be freed. It is probably no chance if xenophobic nationalism grows together, and hand in hand, with a return to fundamentalist trends in religious practice and thought.

4.5 Similar trends, much more radical and violent, can be observed in the Islamic world, and in some parts of the Western (Christian) world. Whether a return to religion can happen without a parallel recrudescence of religious intolerance will depend upon the will or the ability of thinkers and lay believers alike to disentangle themselves from those traditional conceptions which we have seen to be the best conductors of intolerance: the idea of closeness for the Jews, and universalist hopes of conversion for Christians and Muslims alike.

Such a change seems more easily feasible in Christianity, since the much more radical secularization processes in the Western world have seriously weakened its position in society and seem to have brought to a rather deep disentanglement of religion from political power, and to have paved the way towards acknowledgement of other faiths as spiritually legitimate.

It may be, moreover, that the contemporary world will see deep transformations of the concept of the stranger, brought about by the communications revolution and the planetary dimension of human problems. It remains to be seen, however, whether a better knowledge of the outsider will lead more easily to its recognition. After all, we have emphasized the crucial role played by the consciousness of the outsider in the search for identity. There is no identity without boundaries, and no boundaries with someone on the other side.

