

INNER-WORLDLY MONASTICISM

Towards a Model of Rabbinic–Halakhic Spirituality



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University of Washington

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Archbishop Chrysostomos



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Dr. Jaffee has served on the editorial boards of a number of academic journals in religious studies, including the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and is presently Co-Editor of the *AJS Review*, the journal of the American Association for Jewish Studies. He is the author of eight major books in religious studies and the history of religion and of some thirty scholarly articles. Of particular note are two of his popular books, *Jews–Christians–Muslims: An Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*, co-authored with John Corrigan, Carlos Eire, and Frederick Denny (Prentice Hall, 1998), and *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Preface

Professor Martin Jaffee is one of this country's most distinguished scholars of comparative religion, the history of religion, and Jewish studies. His illuminating books and articles show a scientific objectivity and a depth of understanding in the psychological and spiritual dynamics of religion that are rare in academic circles these days. One might rightly say that he is a polyhistor of sorts in religious studies, equally *au courant* with the latest scholarship in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic history and religious themes, alike, and able to bring his considerable analytical skills to bear on all three religious traditions with remarkable aplomb and percipience. In our scholarly and intellectual correspondence, I have come to think of myself more as his academic amanuensis than an interlocutor, often finding myself taking notes from our exchanges and recording his insights and observations. Indeed, he has led me, by his comments and writings, into a far deeper understanding of my Orthodox Faith. That his brilliant insights into religion are free of the superficialities of ecumenism and religious relativism—as the proper study of comparative religion, if it is to preserve the goal of objectivity and, at the same time, the integrity of the traditions that it studies (and thus not trivialize them), must be—has been a constant source of intellectual and personal delight to me.

In the present monograph, taken from a lecture delivered by Dr. Jaffee at an academic conference in the Spring of 2006, we see all of his skills at work, marked—as his scholarly efforts unfailingly are—by a disarming humility, occasional levity, and an enthusiastic engagement with his subject that represent the contemporary clerisy at its best. He explores the arcane Jewish monastic communities of the first century, which, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, were known only by cursory references in the works of Josephus and Philo and adventitious remarks in Pliny the Elder and Eusebius. He goes on to describe for us the monastic features of later Rabbinic–Halakhic spirituality as it possibly

reflects the mystical and ascetical precepts and practices of these groups. His observations are of immense interest to Jewish observance, since it is often assumed that monasticism and its methods are somehow foreign to Jewish spiritual practice. They are also of momentous interest to the Christian scholar, since the fore-runners of Christian monasticism, including St. John the Baptist, were born and formed in the same world of messianic and prophetic spirituality to which Professor Jaffee traces the short-lived phenomenon of Jewish monasticism that he uses as a springboard for his comments on the monastic character of what he calls the “inner-worldly monasticism” of Rabbinic–Halakhic spirituality.

For the Orthodox Christian, it becomes immediately apparent that the spiritual model which is reflected in observant (Halakhic) Judaism is quite distinct from that of Orthodox monasticism and asceticism. The Christocentric messianic universalism of Orthodox Christianity is everywhere the central feature of Orthodox monasticism: the goal of union with Christ, the Archetype of the restored human—man and woman transformed and restored in the Theanthropic agency of God made Man making man God by Grace. Both Jewish messianism and the efficacy of the observance of God’s Commandments in the Halakhic pursuit of holiness are significantly at odds, then, with the spiritual anthropology and soteriological scheme of Eastern Orthodoxy. One cannot miss this fact. Yet, an undeniably similar *vision* of human holiness and transformation in Orthodox Christianity and Halakhic spirituality, as Dr. Jaffee so charily describes the latter, emerges from the heterogeneity of the first-century religious world, replete with various common traits and external elements of observance. This fascinating fact, alone, commends this brilliant and provocative essay. It further evinces, moreover, the spiritual heritage of Orthodox monasticism, which draws from the light of the Jewish Prophets and is illumined, even in its Christocentric character, by the historical witness of certain ascetic, spiritual, and observant aspects of the Mosaic Covenant, which also

survive, as Professor Jaffee posits, in the “monastic” elements of Halakhic observance.

Finally, I would like to observe that comparative studies of religious traditions that draw on elements of historical commonality without overstating or embroidering them—and the present essay avoids just such abuse—constitute an “academic februation” of sorts. They provide the thinking religious scholar with an opportunity to investigate in an intelligent manner the common historical antecedents of various religious spiritual traditions, but without falling to what I earlier called the “superficies” of popular ecumenism, which seeks to go beyond commonality to doctrinal adequation. Mature scholarship never demands equivalence from similarity and should certainly not eschew essential differences in observing conceptual or accidental commonalities. The study of *simple similarities* builds on a genuine ecumenical spirit, avoiding the jejune pursuit of unity in some absurd religious *lowest common denominator*. It is my hope, then, that this monograph series will continue publishing essays like the present, which illuminate and teach in a genuine spirit of scholarship, while preserving, as I also observed in my preliminary comments above, the integrity of the religious and spiritual traditions under consideration.

Archbishop Chrysostomos

Senior Research Scholar
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Inner-Worldly Monasticism

Towards a Model of Rabbinic–Halakhic Spirituality

Modernism, the Invention of Mysticism, and the Rediscovery of Monasticism

At the risk of sounding too much like a doctrinaire Nominalist, let me insist at the outset that we can make little progress in the comparative and phenomenological study of religious traditions until we distinguish very carefully our “names” for the phenomena of religious life from the “things” these “names” denote. Whatever these “things” may be *an sich*, as it were, we only know them through the verbal and conceptual abstractions generated by, and among, intellectual communities that resolve to “name” and classify them. “Mysticism,” I submit, is a classic example of a “name” that has come to identify so many diverse “things,” in so many distinct worlds of discourse, that the name itself is nearly useless for serious comparative work.

This situation, I suspect, is not of particularly recent vintage. It goes back to the earliest usages of the term “mysticism” in the history of the English language. My brief glance at the online *Oxford English Dictionary* (*sub verbum*: “mysticism”) reveals at least two sorts of “things” identified, within the English linguistic community, by the “name” “Mysticism,” and they are decidedly *not* identical.

The first, with a usage going back to at least 1724, is in fact a thing to be avoided, *viz.*, “religious belief that is characterized by vague, obscure, or confused spirituality; a belief system based on the assumption of occult forces, mysterious supernatural agencies, *etc.*” While this usage persists into the present, it is usually replaced by “superstition” (a.k.a. “the Other Guy’s religion”).

The second usage is of roughly the same era, first documented in 1736. Let’s call it the Younger Brother of the “mysticism as confusion” school of usage. This second definition of “mysticism,”

then, goes like this: “Belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or devotion to the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the intellect.”

This is unquestionably a superior usage to that of the Older Brother. In the first place, it sounds relatively “judgment-free”; that is, we are not predisposed by the very definition itself to assume a positive or negative opinion about the “thing” being named. Who, after all, wants to be associated with “vague, obscure, or confused spirituality”? In the second place, this definition of “mysticism” has the advantage of encompassing an enormous range of religious-literary traditions around the world and across the ages that does in fact seem to be—more or less—about “absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender.”

Now these advantages of Younger Brother Mysticism over Older Brother Mysticism, obvious as they are, do not yet permit us to say that Younger Brother is entirely innocent of flaw. One, at least, seems to me quite obvious: the *-ism* in mysticism denotes neither a mere *belief in* nor even a discrete *experience of* “union with God”; rather, a proper account of “mysticism” must include the *way of life* and specific *discipline* that is held to lead toward a certain experience about which certain beliefs are held. This point may appear a bit picky, but *the erasure of the fact of pursuing a certain lifestyle as an element in the definition of “mysticism” is symptomatic of a larger and more grievous error in Western thinking about “mysticism” in general.* That error is, in a nutshell, the tendency—observable in the *OED*—to conceive “mysticism” as primarily an *experience or belief* rather than a *way of life*.¹

¹ An excellent resource for reviewing the state of “mysticism” in academic discourse is S. T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). I have been deeply influenced by the arguments of several contributors to this volume about the error of defining “mysticism” by its alleged “experiential component” rather than by publicly available information derived from social institutions and texts. I also find very helpful the entire discussion of mysticism as “a way of being religious” recently offered in D. Cannon,

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“Professor Martin Jaffee is one of this country’s most distinguished scholars of comparative religion, the history of religion, and Jewish studies. His illuminating books and articles show a scientific objectivity and a depth of understanding in the psychological and spiritual dynamics of religion that are rare in academic circles these days. One might rightly say that he is a polyhistor of sorts in religious studies, equally *au courant* with the latest scholarship in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic history and religious themes, alike, and able to bring his considerable analytical skills to bear on all three religious traditions with remarkable aplomb and percipience. In our scholarly and intellectual correspondence, I have come to think of myself more as his academic amanuensis than an interlocutor, often finding myself taking notes from our exchanges and recording his insights and observations. Indeed, he has led me, by his comments and writings, into a far deeper understanding of my Orthodox Faith. That his brilliant insights into religion are free of the superficialities of ecumenism and religious relativism—as the proper study of comparative religion, if it is to preserve the goal of objectivity and, at the same time, the integrity of the traditions that it studies (and thus not trivialize them), must be—has been a constant source of intellectual and personal delight to me.”

*From the “Preface”
by Archbishop Chrysostomos*