

HERE I STAND

by

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No more Big Daddy; the monarchy is dead.
I take responsibility for the devils in my head.
My love is like a circle that spins to set me free.
My heart belongs to the L*rd Who doesn't lord it over me.

--Rabbi Shefa Gold

I am a Jew, an inheritor of three thousand years and more of the Jewish tradition. I stand in the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah; of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; of the gentle Serah, daughter of Asher; of the abused Tamar, daughter of David, and of her half-brother and rapist Amnon; of the libidinous King David himself, the rebellious Prince Absalom, the magnificent King Solomon; of Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah; of the Talmudic sages Hillel and Shammai and all the commentators through the millennia; and – let us acknowledge it – of Rabbi Jesus. And I stand as well in the traditions of all those throughout the world who are G*d-wrestlers, who are G*d-worshippers, who are G*d-intoxicated. The ancient rabbis spoke of the 613 Commandments in the Torah. Moses, they said, came and reduced them to ten,¹ Micah (6:8) to three and Habakkuk (2:4) to one.² If Habakkuk can summarize the entire Torah in one sentence,³ then I can summarize my belief system in one sentence: **Despite all the negativity, all the wrongness in the world, yet it remains absolutely true that, as G*d declares (Genesis 1:31), all Creation is not merely good but very good!** All the rest of my theology is commentary; let us begin the commentary, examining the nature of G*d, of Creation, of humanity, and of salvation.⁴

The Nature of G*d

“There is . . . a good which alone is simple and . . . which alone is unchangeable – and this is G*d.” (Augustine 11:10) With Augustine,⁵ I find G*d to be good and simple. In the Jewish tradition, G*d is called “one” in three distinct ways. G*d is אחד (one, not two), יחיד

¹ Never mind the anachronism that not all the Commandments, not all the Torah, had been revealed by (or at) the time Moses ascended Sinai; the Jewish tradition asserts that not only the entire Torah but all the commentaries down to the present day and beyond were revealed to Moses! Indeed, the tradition claims that the pre-Sinaitic patriarchs and even the antediluvian patriarchs observed all the Commandments of the Torah, even if on a spiritual rather than a physical level. It seems not greatly different from the Fundamentalist Christian assertion that the heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures were Christians even before the birth of Jesus.

² While those who teach salvation by faith often cite this verse as justification, the Jewish tradition asserts that its point is that, while it is our deeds that define our G*d-relationship, it is the faith of the righteous that brings about ter [gender-neutral singular of *their*] deeds. Thus, צדיק באמונתו יחיה, the righteous will live [as prescribed] by ter faith.

³ As did Hillel when he declared, “What is hateful to you do not do to another. That is the entire Torah; all the rest is commentary.”

⁴ The space limitations of this paper have compelled me to omit many areas which I would like to have included – in particular, human free will vis-a-vis Divine omnipotence and Divine foreknowledge, the existence of universes within G*d beyond this universe, and the efficacy of prayer (G*d’s responsiveness). Further, I have had to reduce the areas which I do explore and present them in a far shorter form than I would wish.

⁵ *Contra* Rabbi David Blumenthal (*Facing the Abusing G*d*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

(unified, not divisible into parts), and מיוחד (unique, the only One). There are not several G*d*s; there is but one G*d. G*d is a simple unity, although we may, with our limited understanding, perceive “aspects” of G*d, as we call G*d by various Names according to our perception and according to what we perceive G*d doing at the time (Creator, Nurturer, Merciful, etc.). G*d is the only One, the only self-existent One in all Creation (even though describing G*d as “in Creation” is inadequate, for it is Creation that is within G*d,⁶ as the panentheisms of both Process, as taught by John Cobb and David R. Griffin, and Feminist eco-theology, as taught by Sally McFague, teach). I would not disagree with Augustine’s assertion that nothing is bad *eo ipso*, but that things become bad or good according as they are used for bad or good ends, but I would modify his conclusion to say that certain things, that is, certain actions, carry a *prima facie* presumption of goodness, others of badness. It is this distinction that I understand to be the primary consequence of Adam and Eve’s having eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.⁷

Aquinas (Q. 2) brings his “proof” of the existence of G*d: (1) G*d’s existence is not self-evident. (2) G*d’s existence can be demonstrated. (3) G*d exists, because the world exists, and the world could not have arisen from nothing. Aquinas’ reasoning is triply flawed. First, G*d’s existence is, indeed, self-evident to those who believe, even if not to those who do not believe. As several of the Hassidic masters have remarked, for those who believe, no proof is necessary; for those who do not believe, no proof is sufficient. Second, G*d is infinite; believers and non-believers alike would, I submit, agree on this point (although believers and non-believers alike may disagree on just what that means). Our minds and our language are finite, and we can therefore speak of G*d only by analogy.⁸ No finite reasoning can suffice to demonstrate the existence of an infinite G*d. I am forced to an apophatic theology or, at the very least, to declare that anything I may say about G*d (even that G*d is!) is merely metaphor. How can one “prove” That Which is beyond us? By claiming to prove

⁶ The Jewish tradition sometimes calls G*d המקום, “the Place,” saying that G*d is the Place of the Universe; the Universe is not G*d’s location. There is an interesting *gematria* (Hebrew numerology) on this expression. If we take G*d’s four-letter name and evaluate each of its letters according to the “square values” – Aleph is 1, Bet is 4, Gimel is 9, etc. – we find that the Name has a value of $100 + 25 + 36 + 25 = 186$. If we evaluate the word מקום (Place) by basic gematria – Aleph is 1, Bet is 2, Gimel is 3 – we find its value also to be $40 + 100 + 6 + 40 = 186$. (Gematria is based on a decimal system. After Yud = 10, it progresses by tens; after Koof = 100 by hundreds. The square system evaluates each letter as the square of its basic value.)

⁷ Concerning the eating of the forbidden fruit, the Hassidic master Rebbe Gershon Hanoch Leiner of Radzin (d. 15 December 1890), interprets Genesis 2:16-17 as **Of every tree in the Garden thou mayest eat, and of the Tree of Knowledge the good; the evil thou shalt not eat**, an interpretation supported by the Hebrew text with only a slight change in punctuation. In this interpretation, as Rebbe Gershon Hanoch continues, Adam and Eve did not sin at all! I find myself moving toward this understanding, but I have not yet examined its possible implications sufficiently to claim it as my own position.

⁸ This is part of the reason why, in keeping with the Jewish tradition, I refrain from spelling out G*d’s Name.

G*d's existence, Aquinas attempts to limit G*d; a G*d Whom we could explain is unsatisfactory.⁹ Third, Aquinas only takes causality back one level. Even if we accept his Aristotelian doctrine that there must be a first cause, he does not demonstrate that this must be G*d; he has not demonstrated that G*d has no cause.

“Theology,” Karl Barth teaches, “must begin with Jesus Christ . . . [and] must also end with Him.” Why is this unacceptable? Well, first of all, because of what it says about me. But, more importantly, because of what it says about G*d. It's not that Barth limits humanity's response to G*d; Barth would limit G*d! Barth places himself in what Henri Bergson called a “closed society” and far outside H. Richard Neibuhr's radical monotheism. It speaks to G*d's greater glory that G*d can be served in many ways, as a veritable pantheon of theologians of almost every major religious faith tradition testifies (Please see Appendix A).^{10,11}

The Nature of Creation

Continuing from his acknowledgment that G*d is good, Augustine (11:23) declares that “good things exist . . . which only a G*d Who was good would have created.” Going beyond Augustine, however, I move from here to my “boss verse,” Genesis 1:31. Indeed, good things exist, but that is not enough. The good things are not incidental to Creation; their very goodness constitutes the essence of Creation.

Asserting the “very-good-ness” of Creation, of course, leads to the question of theodicy, the question that necessarily troubles any cosmophilic theologian. There is no fully satisfactory answer to the question of theodicy. Augustine (11:23), blames evil on a “devil” who has somehow managed to rebel against G*d.¹² Luther (speaking explicitly of humanity,

⁹ As Rebbe Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (Polish Hassidic master, d. 22 January 1859) declares, “A G*d Whom any Tom, Dick, or Harry could understand is too small a G*d for me.”

¹⁰ Exodus 18 tells us of Moses' taking the advice of his father-in-law, whom Exodus takes great pains to identify as a pagan priest (the Hebrew word is כהן, the same word that is used to designate members of the Aaronic priesthood).

¹¹ After Rebbe Shalom Shakhna (d. 10 October 1802), the son of Rebbe Abraham the Angel (d. 27 September 1776), was freed from the limitations of corporeal existence, two of his disciples went to Lublin to study with Rebbe Yaakov Yitzhak (d. 15 August 1815), known as the Seer of Lublin. When they arrived, they found the Seer out in the open, reciting the blessing of the New Moon. Because he did this somewhat differently from the way to which they had been accustomed, they did not promise themselves much from Lublin, and they decided to leave the town the next day.

When they entered the rebbe's house the next day to take their leave, he spoke words of greeting to them and immediately added, “A G*d Whom one could serve only in one set way? What kind of G*d would that be?”

They bowed before him and became his disciples.

¹² Although Augustine fails to explain how the devil gained the ability so to rebel.

but, by extension, of all Creation), denies the goodness of Creation; if Creation is bad, then we need not explain evil. Cobb and Griffin say that G*d does not prevent evil but brings from the mess which evil produces “whatever good is possible.” McFague denies G*d’s authority and thus opens the universe to anything that may happen. Blumenthal explicitly denies G*d’s goodness; if G*d is abusive, as Blumenthal posits, then evil occurs naturally. Rabbi Harold Kushner¹³ (very similar in this respect to McFague) denies G*d’s omnipotence. I find all these responses unsatisfying, but I can do no better than to fall back on the “mystery” that G*d’s ways are not our ways.¹⁴ In any system of thought, of course, there must necessarily be certain facts (axioms or postulates) which lie at the base of the system and which are therefore not subject to proof or disproof. Theodicy, I submit, is one such.

In Book 14, Augustine seems to make a radical separation between the City of Man and the City of G*d. I disagree. Again deriving my position from Genesis 1:31, I emphasize the “very-good-ness of Creation, and I conclude that this world, this created world in which we live, is not other than the City of G*d. Because G*d is יחיד, G*d’s Creation is also unitary, and the “City of G*d” and “City of Man” are not separate!

Luther (Disputation), as his predecessors, is cosmophobic in the extreme. Man,¹⁵ being a bad tree, (13:4) can only will and do evil. Since erring man is able to love the creature (14:16), it is impossible for him to love G*d. To love G*d (19:95) is to hate oneself. Human beings, I reply, are children of G*d; throughout both the Tanach and the Christian Testament, we find the metaphor of human beings as children of G*d and of G*d as our Divine Parent.

¹³ *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York: Schocken Books, 1981, his response to his son’s death from progeria.

¹⁴ *During the lifetime of one of the great Hassidic masters, not a single harsh decree was issued by the Tsarist government against his village, and his disciples naturally credited him with interceding in Heaven to protect the village. After he passed from the flesh, however, the decrees began coming down, and his disciples were puzzled. It is said, after all, that a great spiritual master is spiritually stronger after death than when burdened by the demands of the body. Since the master had protected his village from the harsh decrees during his lifetime, why was he not doing so now? His chief disciple went to the master’s grave and entered a deep meditation, posing the question to the master. A few nights later, the master came to his disciple in a dream. “You are correct,” he said. “I used my spiritual abilities to protect our village from the harsh decrees that would otherwise have come down from the Tsar, because I understood them as evil. Now that I have ascended to the upper worlds, however, I am able to see with a greater, more cosmic, insight, and I can see that even those harsh decrees have their place in the Divine Plan. Because I am no longer able to perceive them as evil, I am no longer able to prevent them. If you perceive them as evil, then you stop them.”*

On a human level, we are obligated to perceive certain acts as evil and we are therefore obligated to do whatever we can to prevent them. On a Cosmic (Divine) level, however, even the evil that transpires in this world has its place. G*d’s perception is not our perception.

¹⁵ Gender specificity in Luther and his translation. Luther clearly intends all humanity when he speaks of “man.”

G*d's love for humanity, similarly, is a recurring theme of Scripture, and, if G*d is good (as I have already asserted), then G*d's children, created in the image and after the likeness of our Divine Parent, must carry the presumption of goodness. *Contra* Luther,¹⁶ I stand with Scripture. G*d commands us both to love G*d (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to love others (Leviticus 19:18).¹⁷ G*d, being good and loving (Blumenthal to the contrary notwithstanding), will not command us contradictorily. Hence, since we are commanded by G*d (a) to love G*d and (b) to love others (c) as ourselves, it follows necessarily that we are capable of loving all three – G*d, ourselves, and others – without contradiction.

Barth asserts that there is (or should be) no point of contact, *kein Anknüpfungspunkt*, between religion and “the world,” that religion should not, may not, must not, be influenced by culture nor – I grant him consistency in this matter – society by religion. In this, he is reflected by Stephen Jay Gould¹⁸ when he asserts that religion and science constitute “non-overlapping magisteria.” Both would likely be highly surprised to learn of the similarity, and both their assertions are incorrect. If religion is to be utterly independent of society, then, for example, Exodus 18 would have no reason to tell us of Moses' establishing a system of justice courts. Again, we find that Scripture – and there are innumerable other examples in all the world's sacred Scriptures – finds the structuring of society to be a religiously significant field of endeavor, Barth to the contrary notwithstanding.

“As we deal with those higher organisms in which the work of the Logos is especially to be discerned,” Cobb and Griffin tell us (p. 98 and throughout), “the decision of the creature becomes increasingly important.” Donald R. Griffin, an outstanding zoologist (the discoverer of echolocation in bats) demonstrated that such varied species as chimpanzees, dolphins, weaver ants, and assassin bugs clearly exhibit a thought process and are not mere automata controlled by their instincts.¹⁹ It is not a great leap – it is one which I make unequivocally – to realize (a) that those whom we have dubbed “lower species” may have a spiritual life as well as a thought process and (b) that “the decision of the creature” may be every bit as

¹⁶ Despite Luther's proud assertion of “*Sola Scriptura*.”

¹⁷ Jesus likened these two Commandments to each other and even called them the greatest of all the Commandments. The Hassidic master Rebbe Menahem Mendel of Kotzk pointed out that the *gematria* of Leviticus 19:18b (וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כַּמּוֹךְ אֲנִי יְיָ ה' וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְיָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ; **Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself; I-AM is the Eternal**) and that of Deuteronomy 6:5a (וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְיָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ; **Thou shalt love thine Eternal G*d**) are identical; the former is 6 + 1 + 5 + 2 + 400 + 30 + 200 + 70 + 20 + 20 + 40 + 6 + 20 + 1 + 50 + 10 + 10 + 5 + 6 + 10 = 907, and the latter is 6 + 1 + 5 + 2 + 400 + 1 + 400 + 10 + 5 + 6 + 5 + 1 + 30 + 5 + 10 + 20 = 907.

¹⁸ *Rocks of Ages*. NY: Ballantine, 1999; page unknown; cited from memory.

¹⁹ See especially his books *The Question of Animal Awareness* (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1976) and *Animal Thinking* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

important in them as it is in us.^{20,21,22}

The Nature of Humanity

In Book 13, Augustine discusses the “fall” or “sin” of Adam and Eve. He perceives the consequences of their having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge as unequivocally negative, a conclusion from which I am obliged to demur. Certainly, if the first couple had not eaten of the forbidden fruit, they would have remained in Paradise eternally. But my tradition does not view the expulsion from Eden as wholly punitive. The serpent of Eden, by *gematria*, is equivalent to the Messiah.²³ The serpent was sent by G*d to inveigle Adam and Eve into

²⁰ We can – I do – extrapolate from Donald Griffin’s work to assert that even inanimate beings (what many Native American traditions personify as “stone people,” “sky people,” and so forth) have a consciousness, albeit one which we are even less able to detect. (The Native Hawaiian tradition does profess to be able to detect the consciousness in rocks, in the sea, in mountains. Pele is not only the volcano goddess; she is the volcano herself.) I express this belief in my everyday actions. When I open a package or an envelope, I try to do so with as little damage to the packaging material as possible. When I get into my car to go somewhere, I tell my car where we are going, and, after thanking G*d for a safe trip, I also thank my car for taking me there.

²¹ “Where are the redwoods’ philosophers?” it has been asked. The issue may not be their consciousness so much as our perception.

²² One day, in the summer of 1896, Rebbe Sholom Dov Baer of Lubavitch (d. 21 March 1920) was out strolling with his son (who was later to succeed his father as Rebbe Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson of Lubavitch, d. 28 January 1950). The crops were almost ripe, as the two men walked through the fields, and the grain and the grass were nodding in a gentle breeze. “Behold G*dliness!” said the rebbe to his son. “Each movement of every single ear of grain and blade of grass is a miracle of G*d.”

As they walked on, they found themselves in a forest. Deep in contemplation of what his father had said, the younger man absent-mindedly plucked a leaf from a tree that and held it in his hand. As people often do and without taking particular notice, he tore off little pieces from the leaf he walked on and tossed them to the ground.

The rebbe then said, “Rabbi Isaac Luria [Galilee, 1534-1572] says that not only is every leaf of a tree a creature with divine vitality, which the Almighty created with a certain end as part of the ultimate purpose of Creation, but, moreover, every single leaf contains the spark of a soul that descends to this world in order to rectify something from a prior lifetime.

“Just now,” he continued, “we discussed the subject of Divine Providence and, quite without thinking, you plucked a leaf, held it in your hand, played with it, turned it around, squashed it, tore it up in little pieces, and scattered it in various places.

“How can a person be so light-minded in relation to a creature of the Almighty? This leaf is something created by the Almighty for a particular reason. It has a G*d-given vitality, it has a body, and it has its life. In what way is the leaf’s *I* smaller than your *I*?”

²³ *Serpent*, שרן, has a *gematria* of $50 + 8 + 300 = 358$. *Messiah*, משיח, has a *gematria* of $40 + 300 + 10 + 8 = 358$. Thus, the Kabbalistic tradition teaches, the two are linked. In particular, the serpent is the one who enables us to set out on our journey of spiritual growth; Messiah personifies the conclusion of that

eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Once we acquired knowledge, we became aware of distinctions and, since Eden is a wholly unified realm that transcends all distinctions, we no longer belonged there. By expelling us from Eden – by setting us up to be expelled – G*d acted as a mother bird does in pushing her fledglings out of the nest, forcing them to flap their little wings and fly. Remaining in Eden would have meant remaining children eternally; in Eden there is no room for growth. Thus, to me – *contra* Augustine – the expulsion from Eden was opportunity rather than punishment.

Luther (*Freedom of a Christian*, p. 596) contrasts humanity's spiritual nature (which he characterizes as good and as the source – G*d, of course, is the ultimate source – of righteousness) with our bodily (“carnal”) nature. He echoes Augustine's separation of the City of G*d from the City of Man; it is no more convincing in the extremely harsh voice of the 16th-century Saxon than in that of the only slightly less strident 5th-century Numidian.

Luther so strongly denies free will that he views all humanity as sinful. That is, human beings are not merely *able* to sin but *filled* with sin. Our essential nature is that we are sinners. How sad, and how disturbing! Has G*d, then, created us full of sin? Is sin our essential nature?

I swim, but Mark Spitz is a swimmer. That is to say, I may swim from time to time – I may even enjoy it greatly and do it quite well – but my life is not defined by my swimming. Mark Spitz's nature is to swim; he does not merely swim; he is a swimmer.

A young man, it is said, wrote to the author Rainer Maria Rilke to say, “I want to become a writer. Please tell me how I may go about it.” Rilke replied, “If, from the moment you awaken in the morning until the moment you go to bed at night, you think constantly of writing – how everything you experience will appear in written form – then you are a writer.”²⁴

As Mark Spitz is a swimmer, his life defined and bounded by swimming; as Rainer Maria Rilke is a writer, his life defined and bound up at every moment with writing, so Luther sees every human being as a sinner, our lives defined by and bound up with our sinning. We are unable to keep from sinning; our works avail us nothing, and we can do nought but fall at the feet of G*d's Throne and rely solely on G*d's Grace for justification.

I say no. Human beings – beautiful, beloved, children of G*d, created in the image and

journey, when we will be able to re-enter Eden, but on a more mature level. As the Zen masters teach, “To the beginner [who does not see beyond the obvious], a mountain is a mountain. To the student [who is so concerned with the details], a mountain is not a mountain; to the master [who has gained a gestaltist perspective], a mountain is a mountain.”

²⁴ The story is apocryphal, but Rilke did actually declare, “Whoever does not consecrate himself wholly to art with all his wishes and values can never reach the highest goal. He is not an artist at all.” Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: W. H. Norton & Company, Inc., 1960). I do not have the page citation.

after the likeness of our Divine Parent – are not sinners, are not sinful. Yet we do wrong; we disobey; we transgress G*d’s Commandments. Yes we do. How do I explain this? We, as human beings, are finite, limited. We will make mistakes (sometimes, let us admit, intentionally). The Jewish tradition distinguishes among various types of “sin.” The basic word for *sin* is אָטוּם, a term derived from archery and signifying *missing the target*. If I am on a archery range and miss the target, I must aim more carefully next time. If I am wearing a clean white suit and it becomes soiled – whether because I intentionally jumped into a mud puddle or because I did not realize the mud puddle was there or because a passing car, through no fault of mine, splashed some mud from the street onto my suit – I will need to have the suit cleaned; I will not discard it. G*d, in my limited understanding of G*d, has provided us with (a) instructions for keeping the suit (the soul) clean and (b) further instructions for cleaning it when it becomes soiled. With the Jewish tradition, I believe that we “get right with G*d” by our actions and by the intentions which those actions embody, not, *contra* Luther, by what we believe nor, *contra* Calvin, by G*d’s arbitrarily granting justification to pre-selected individuals.²⁵ I believe that the Commandments which G*d gives us²⁶ are not vehicles merely for strengthening faith by suppressing the body’s desires, but actual instructions for living a G*d-oriented life. Because G*d has graciously granted us the Mitzvot, it stands to reason that

²⁵ It was Simhat Torah, the Festival (in the fall, three weeks after Rosh Hashanah) that celebrates the completion and immediate restarting of the cycle of reading the Torah, and a group of us attended the synagogue of a well-known charismatic Orthodox rabbi. (He had been one of my mentors during my ordination process; he has since passed from the flesh.) One of our group – I’ll call him Morris – prided himself on being an atheist. “If G*d existed,” he had said to me on more than one occasion, “I would oppose Him.” Morris, however, came with us to the Festival celebration – not because it was a *religious* thing to do, but because it was a *Jewish* thing to do.

As part of the services on Simhat Torah, all the Torah scrolls are taken from the Ark, and the congregants (in an Orthodox synagogue, only the men) take turns dancing with the scrolls. When a scroll was handed to Morris, he, too, danced with it – not because it was a *religious* thing to do, but because it was a *Jewish* thing to do. With such enthusiasm did he dance that he broke three bones in his foot and didn’t realize it until the next day!

Some years later, I recounted the tale of Morris on Simhat Torah to a class being taught by a Hassidic rabbi in Atlanta, and one of the other students in the class posed a question. “Did he then become *frum* (religiously observant)?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “He remained the same person he was before.”

“Well, then,” my questioner continued, “what good did it do?”

“When Morris comes before the Heavenly Court,” I replied, “those three broken bones will limp forward as his witnesses and testify in his behalf that, at the moment when Morris was dancing with the Torah, he fulfilled a *Mitzvah* (Commandment) that the greatest *tzaddik* (saint, perfectly righteous individual) cannot fulfill.”

“What *Mitzvah* is that?” my questioner sneered.

I then cited the Talmudic dictum, “G*d has declared, ‘Would that they had forsaken Me and clung to My Torah.’”

²⁶ The 613 Mitzvot of the Torah.

we are capable of fulfilling them, and G*d has even provided methods²⁷ for cleansing ourselves of the stains which we accumulate when we transgress.²⁸

Unlike his predecessors (especially Luther), Schleiermacher describes the human soul as the product of a polarity of two inclinations – “two opposing drives,” as he puts it. One is the desire to draw in all that is about; the other is the desire to “extend its inner self” without limit. Schleiermacher advocates the balancing of these two polar opposites. They thus form not a dichotomy in irredeemable antagonism to each other, but rather almost a Hegelian thesis/antithesis polarity that can produce a new synthesis. I agree, with an explanation. I am reminded of the Jewish concept of the יצר הטוב (the so-called “good inclination,” the altruistic inclination, the desire to do that which brings good to others), and the יצר הרע (the so-called “evil inclination,” more accurately called the negative or self-directed inclination, the desire to receive for the self alone). The ancient rabbis said that it is only with the development of the latter that G*d (Genesis 1:31) declares all Creation to be **very good**. Were it not for the יצר הרע, they declare, nobody would ever marry, build a house, or raise a family. Our task is to turn (redeem) the יצר הרע and to use it for good.

Schleiermacher acknowledges individuals as “translators of G*d’s will,” a significant change from earlier theologians, who seemed to perceive themselves as mere vessels with no real input of their own. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, even the semi-populist Wesley, all seemed to hold that what they said was solely G*d’s Word, that they themselves had no share in shaping it.²⁹ When Schleiermacher views people as “translators,” he necessarily acknowledges (he says so almost explicitly) that each individual has put his or her own energy into the process, that theology is something developed jointly by G*d and human beings in partnership. I stand with Schleiermacher. When Moses receives the first Tablets of the Law

²⁷ For the Jew, there was in ancient times the Temple’s sacrificial ritual. Today, G*d having acknowledged our growth by taking the Temple from us, we have prayer and repentance (and full repentance is defined in the Jewish tradition as including encountering the same or a similar temptation again and not transgressing, modeled in Genesis 44 by Judah’s offering to sacrifice himself in Benjamin’s place, thereby redeeming the brothers’ having sold Joseph into slavery twenty-two years earlier). For the traditional Christian, the means of atonement is, of course, attachment to Jesus as Christ. And every faith tradition around the world has its means of recovering from transgression.

²⁸ Rebbe Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, founder of Lubavitch Hassidism, in his *Likkutei Amarim (Tanya)*, says that there are three types of people – those who commit sins (the רשעים), those who have completely transcended any inclination to commit sins (the צדיקים), and those who, while they never sin, still retain some inclination to do so, although they are able to keep that inclination always in check (the בינוניים, intermediate ones). His position – that only one who has wholly transcended the inclination to transgress can be classed as righteous, that one who never sins but still struggles with the inclination is merely “intermediate” – is quite anomalous within the Jewish tradition and seems similar to Luther’s position, even though his language is very different from Luther’s

²⁹ “I am like a little pencil in G*d’s hand. G*d does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it.” (Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

at Sinai (Exodus 24:12, 31:18, 32:16), the Tablets are personally carved and engraved by G*d. When Moses sees the people worshipping the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:19), these Tablets are shattered. Then, when Moses returns to the mountain, he carves the second Tablets (Exodus 34:1), and he, at G*d's direction, engraves the words upon them. It is these Tablets, the ones into which Moses puts his own energy (as distinguished from his passively receiving the first Tablets) that survive unbroken. The first set of Tablets tells us what is likely to happen when we act solely as channels, not putting our own energy into G*d's Revelation. The second set tells us the likely result when we become שותפי אלהים, partners with G*d, in the continuing and ongoing work of Creation, when we become what Schleiermacher calls "translators."

Schleiermacher sees humanity as an integral part of the universe (p. 23), not "in opposition to the universe." I would add that humanity's being an integral part of Creation is also distinct from merely being integrated into it.³⁰ Variations on this theme may be found in Process Theology, in McFague, and, especially, in H. Richard Niebuhr's "Radical Monotheism."³¹

The Nature of Salvation

Augustine's goal for human beings (Book 14) seems to be to attain that level of obedience to G*d which will enable them to leave the City of Man and enter the City of G*d.³² While this is the goal, he denies that it is attainable except for a limited number of souls

³⁰ In my chaplaincy work, I found, once the medical staff had gotten to know me and to know that I was medically knowledgeable, that I was *integrated into* the healing process on the medical-surgical units. On the mental health unit, however, I was *integral to* the process. No nurse is going to ask me – nor should she – for advice on starting an IV drip (although she will hear me when I report my observations of the patient's condition), but the psychiatrists often asked me for suggestions on treating the psych patients.

³¹ When Moses experiences his Theophany at the Burning Bush, G*d cautions him (Exodus 3:5), **Come no closer, but take the shoes off thy feet, for the ground on which thou standest is holy.** The Kabbalists offer a non-physical interpretation of this verse.

Come no closer. There is no "closer" to come. Moses was – each of us is – already intimately close to G*d, closer than we are to our own breathing. G*d is not telling Moses to keep his distance but to realize that he is – and we are – already there and need only awaken to that reality.

Take the shoes off thy feet. Remove that which separates us from the soil. The shoes are symbolic; they represent the most obvious separation of אדם, the human being, from אדמה, the soil from which we were made.

The ground on which thou standest is holy. When we remove that separation, when we awaken to our reality as an integral part of Creation, then the ground on which we stand *becomes* holy, wherever it may be!

³² I have already explained my position that these are not separate.

chosen by G*d's Grace.³³ It seems to me that Augustine believes that G*d stacks the deck against us, a belief which I do not share. I stand, rather, with the Jewish tradition, which teaches that G*d in fact stacks the deck in our favor. When one person aids another, the Talmudic sages tell us, s/he is rewarded (the act is counted) by "weighing" not only the person aided, but that person's family and descendants to the end of time. When one person robs another, on the other hand, the transgression is "weighed" only according to the weight of the actual item taken. The sages explain that the helper is concerned about the beneficiary's family and therefore should be credited with their welfare as well as that of the one directly aided, but that the thief is concerned only with the value of what s/he steals and therefore should be charged only with that which s/he had in mind. The effect is that G*d considers the good that we do to be of greater consequence than the wrongs that we may commit.

Luther tells us that works – obedience to G*d's Commandments – have no value in themselves. Works, to Luther, are merely a preparation for faith; they subdue the body in order to enable the soul to reach a requisite level of faith. He thus trivializes virtually the entire Torah and the Commands found in the Christian Testament as well. It is clear to me, from all the Commands written in the Torah, that G*d is deeply concerned about how we act in this world. Not – *contra* McFague's image of the Commandments – because G*d is some sort of authoritarian Dictator, but because G*d, as the Creator (again, *contra* McFague) knows what is in our best interest and so informs us. McFague feels that we must make a choice between G*d as Dictator and G*d as passive. I suggest, rather, that there is a spectrum of views about G*d, that we are not faced with the "borderline personality disorder" of all or nothing.³⁴ G*d has given us Commandments, Instructions for how to live our lives, not out of some Divine Desire for control (G*d is not a control freak) but rather because G*d, as the Creator, knows how the world runs best. We can violate G*d's Commandments, but we do so at our peril. No; G*d's not gonna come whup us upside the head if we disobey, but every action has its consequences, in the spiritual as much as in the Newtonian context. When I bought my car, I received an "Owner's Manual" prepared by the manufacturer. It tells me what gasoline to use, how often to change the oil and perform other routine maintenance, what pressure to maintain in the tires, and so forth. "Mr. Hyundai" is not going to come and punish me if I disobey the instructions in the owner's manual, but my car will not run quite so smoothly. In the same way, G*d will not punish me if I fail to obey the Commandments, but my soul will not run quite so smoothly. Furthermore, the Instructions need not be "one size fits all." Just as the owner's manuals for a Citroën, a Chevrolet, and a Honda will be different (because the cars are different and hence have different needs), so the Torah (owner's manual for the Jewish soul), Gospels (owner's manual for the Christian soul), Qur'an and

³³ This just sounds so similar to Manichaeism that I must wonder whether it indicates that, Augustine never having made peace with his Manichaean history, that history continues to rise up within his writings, even as he denies that it has any validity

³⁴ This is also part of my objection to Augustine's dichotomy of the City of G*d over against the City of Man.

Hadith (owner's manual for the Muslim soul), and so forth will be different.³⁵ Cobb and Griffin assert, echoing Luther, "Grace frees us from the law." I disagree. Grace is not a repeal of the law; rather, the law is itself an aspect of Grace, for it is precisely G*d's Grace that grants us the law, with the implication that we are capable of fulfilling it.

Without joy and passion, religious faith is barren, and it was Schleiermacher who introduced joy and passion into our class. Unlike his predecessor theologians, Schleiermacher seems truly to find joy in his theology. Augustine flagellates himself; Aquinas avoids feeling as if it were the plague; Luther is depressive; Calvin is the poster boy for dourness; Wesley is hardly more emotional than a Vulcan.³⁶ Schleiermacher seems very much to enjoy what he is doing. "If religion ain't fun, we're probably doing it wrong."³⁷ Religion must be relational or it is nothing. The two greatest Commandments, Jesus teaches (and many liberal rabbis would agree)³⁸ are relational – both instruct us to love.³⁹ In the Hebrew Scriptures, Isaac is the epitome of relationality.⁴⁰

³⁵ The Jewish tradition asks why it is that Jacob and Esau, children of the same parents, turned out so different. (Esau, to the Jewish tradition, is the quintessentially bad seed.) It is because, the Talmudic sages tell us, they were given the same upbringing, because their parents treated them both the same, without regard for the fact that they were such different personalities. Further, when Abraham expels Hagar and Ishmael from the camp, driving them out into the desert to their likely deaths, the angel who comes to their rescue says to Hagar (Genesis 21:17), **G*d has heard the voice of the boy there, where he is.** Why, the rabbis ask, was it necessary for the Torah to say "there, where he is"? Would it not have been enough for the angel simply to tell Hagar that G*d had heard the boy's voice? It is because, they say, we are to act in *imitatio D*i* and also hear others' voices where they are, not necessarily where we are; it is a powerful statement for individuality.

³⁶ To those who are not "Star Trek" aficionados, I apologize for the metaphor.

³⁷ No; he never said that, and he likely would not endorse it, at least in this formulation, but it seems to me to epitomize (perhaps, I concede, to oversimplify) his attitude.

³⁸ *New York Magazine*, a few years ago, had a contest (*New York Magazine* holds these contests every week, with the winning entries being printed about a month later) asking readers to submit the beginning phrase of the most arrogant sentence. The winning entry was "Jesus said – and He was right to say so –"

³⁹ "All true living is meeting." (Martin Buber)

⁴⁰ Throughout Isaac's lifetime, he is passive. (What can we expect? His father had bound him and offered him as a sacrifice. A survivor of such abuse will naturally be passive, and we find that, after the binding of Isaac, Isaac is never again described as speaking either to G*d or to Abraham. He seems almost an example of adult-onset autism.) Those things which Isaac does, the actions which he undertakes, are either pale echoes of his father Abraham's actions or equally pale anticipations of what his son Jacob/Israel will do far more strongly – a Georgia autumn, portrayed in pale and gentle pastels, sandwiched between two vibrant oil-painted New England autumns.

In Chapters 23 and 24 of Genesis, for example, Isaac is the primary subject – it is he for whom a bride is being chosen. He is the star of the show, and yet he does not appear. Isaac, it seems, is the dispensable patriarch. But then, in perhaps the only one of Isaac's actions which is fully his own, we read (Genesis 24:67) that **Isaac brought [Rebecca] into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife, and he**

“Religion’s essence,” Schleiermacher says “is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.” Aquinas would have been appalled! Luther and Calvin would have been suspicious. Wesley would have been puzzled. That religion functions not primarily as “head-stuff” but as “heart-stuff” is certainly a major innovation in theological thought. Yet this is precisely what Isaiah – dour and dramatic and strident as his Prophetic voice can be – teaches us. **With joy shall you draw water from the wells of salvation.** (Isaiah 12:3) Joy, Isaiah tells us, has salvific effect. Indeed, it is only with joy that we can **draw water from the wells of salvation.** *Contra* Augustine, *contra* Aquinas, *contra* Luther and Calvin and Wesley, certainly *contra* Barth, no act undertaken without joy can be salvific.⁴¹ It is not only what we do (our works) but how we do them that brings us into relationship with G*d. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said (cited from memory; precise attribution unknown), “The law can’t make somebody love me, but it can certainly stop him from lynching me.” Indeed! But just refraining from lynching me does not establish a relationship.⁴²

loved her, and then was Isaac comforted after his mother’s death. He loved her! This is the first time that the Torah tells us explicitly that someone loved someone. Yes; Abraham is told by G*d to take his son Isaac, whom he loved, but, even there, the text only refers to Isaac as **the one whom thou lovest**; it does not say explicitly, “Abraham loved Isaac,” as it now says about Rebecca that **Isaac . . . loved her.** For the first time, we read the explicit words that someone loved someone.

Perhaps Isaac’s loving Rebecca was a redemption of his having been bound on the altar. Perhaps his being bound on the altar, his experience of betrayal, is what enabled him to love Rebecca. (I will not do to others what my father did to me.) Whatever the reason, Isaac loved, and Isaac taught us to love, and from this one relational act, we learn that Isaac, far from being the dispensable patriarch, just might be the most important of the three!

⁴¹ “The Glory of G*d does not dwell where there is depression, but only where joy prevails.” (The Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hassidism, d. 20 May 1760)

⁴² My wife and I were invited, with several of our political associates, to go to Mississippi as poll-watchers when Charles Evers ran for governor of Mississippi. We lodged with an African-American family in the southwest corner of Mississippi. Each of us, as poll-watchers, was assigned to a separate precinct (there were five precincts voting at our location), and my wife, as the sixth of “our” people, floated among the various positions.

During the morning, I entered into conversation with “their” poll-watcher who was assigned to the same precinct as I was. I responded with interest to his comments on the local high school football team, on hunting and fishing in the area, and on other subjects of local significance.

When the man in whose house my wife and I were lodged brought in a 40-cup coffeepot, my wife, not being assigned to a fixed location, offered coffee to everyone. All “our” people accepted the coffee, but “their” poll-watchers did not. Their tension was palpable. On the one hand, Southern hospitality dictated that they be courteous to this young women visiting their home; on the other hand, they were unable or unwilling to accept something as simple as a cup of coffee from “one of *those* people.”

After a few minutes, however, “their” poll-watcher at my precinct turned to me and said, “That’s your wife giving out the coffee, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” I replied.

He then turned to my wife and said, “I’d sure appreciate a cup of coffee.”

Unfortunately, Schleiermacher claims that religion demands neither action nor belief of its adherents. He speaks of the “misunderstanding that religion is supposed to act,” and he states that one who acts – whether positively or negatively – out of religious motivation will end “in mischief and ruin.”⁴³ I ask Schleiermacher, “If religion requires nothing of its adherents, then why bother?” My question, which I pose to any theology, is precisely Micah’s question – ומה יהיה דורש ממך; **what does the Eternal require of thee?** That is, what does this theology require of its adherents that is significantly different from what they would otherwise do? Not only does Schleiermacher’s theology fail to require him to act otherwise than he would act without it; it does not even require him to do what he *would* otherwise do!

McFague finds that the Universe as the body of G*d necessarily implies an obligation to participate in “social gospel” and “liberation theology” activities. She fails the test of Micah’s question, however, for the actions which she calls a consequence of her “G*d’s Bod” theology are precisely what she would do without that theology, based on her sociology and anthropology.

In relation to this, I would offer my “Christology” (better, perhaps, my “Jesusology”) What is it that a rabbi can draw from Jesus? Especially in view of the assertion of Cobb and Griffin that “Jesus’ teaching . . . was as irrelevant to . . . the Roman Empire as it is in our own time,” what can a rabbi, of all people, draw from Jesus? If even nominal Christians find Jesus’ teaching irrelevant, then why should a non-Christian bother even examining it? Yet I do. As a Jew, as a non-Christian, I need not have a theology about the Incarnation. I need neither affirm nor deny it; as a Jew, I need not even consider it. But Jesus was an historical figure, and I can learn from him. Indeed, he was, to me, a particularly enlightened individual, and there is much to learn from him *as a human teacher*. His particular teachings? Well, many of the things that he said are very valuable, but each of his particular teachings can be found in the works of other teachers, other masters. In Jesus I find an example of the most powerful possible answer to Micah’s question. **What does the Eternal require of thee?** What does Jesus’ theology require of him? His very life! And it is clear that, absent his theology, he would not make this sacrifice. “Father, let this cup pass from me. But not my will, but Thine be done.” What a superb, what an ultimate example of the integrity of a theology. He goes even beyond Job (13:15). **Though G*d slay me, yet will I trust in G*d.** And, no doubt, Job would willingly have gone to his death if G*d had required it of him. But Jesus actually did so and became thereby the ultimate example of the integrity of his theology.

Thereupon, all the other local poll-watchers joined in accepting the coffee that was offered.

⁴³ Why, one may ask, does Barth object so to Schleiermacher and why does he ascribe to Schleiermacher’s influence the endorsement by those theologians of Kaiser Wilhelm’s war of aggression? Schleiermacher anticipates Barth’s *kein Anknüpfungspunkt* with a vengeance! Barth denied that religion should lead us to political involvement, to involvement with society; Schleiermacher went even farther, asserting that religion requires nothing of us. Micah is turning over in his grave!

“Humanity,” Schleiermacher tells us, “has a larger course that it does not retrace but on which it progresses; through its inner alterations it too is perfected into something higher and complete.” So far from Calvin and Luther, with their doctrines of the salvation of only some of humanity, Schleiermacher here tells us that all humanity – we may extrapolate to individuals, although Schleiermacher seems to speak of humanity only collectively – will ultimately attain salvation. This conclusion is a natural consequence of relational theology. Because G*d is relational, G*d seeks the good for all humanity.⁴⁴ Because G*d has “stacked the deck” in our favor, furthermore, we all have the opportunity to reach salvation (however each of us may define salvation). And because I believe in reincarnation (G*d’s a Recycler), each soul has all the time needed to reach that salvation.

But, if we have all the time we need to reach salvation, is that not a license for “anything goes”? If we know that we will always be able to set things right, then why worry about what we do now? As I have said, G*d has provided us with a mechanism for cleaning our spiritual suits. Our transgressions stain our souls, and the cleansing process is more intense (and, hence, lengthier and harsher) when the stains go deeper. Punishment for our sins? Not exactly; rather, it is the consequence of our actions. When I let go of the item that I hold in my hand, its falling to the floor is not some sort of punishment, but rather the natural consequence of my having released it. In the same way, the purification process, far from being a punishment, is a consequence, the natural outcome, of the transgression.

Summary

My theology is derived from Genesis 1:31, **G*d examined all that G*d had created and found it very good.** All the rest is commentary.

G*d’s omnipotence and beneficence are both necessary if Genesis 1:31 is to have any meaning. G*d is Creator, hence omnipotent; G*d judges Creation to be very good; hence G*d is good. (Understanding that anything said about G*d is necessarily metaphoric.)

G*d, in addition to being beneficent and omnipotent, is relational. G*d cares passionately about human beings (individually and collectively) and about every being in Creation, and we, sapient (not merely sentient) beings, have an obligation to respond relationally to G*d. I am, admittedly open to criticism for distinguishing between the sapient and the merely sentient. I respond to that – wholly legitimate – criticism that, while we finite beings make such distinctions, based on how we relate to other sapients, to other sentients, to non-sentients, to non-living beings, G*d, being infinite, can relate to all equally. To the finite, finite differences are significant and meaningful; to the Infinite, all finite quantities are the same.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ I would even go beyond this “species-ist” formulation and say that G*d seeks the good for all.

⁴⁵ “I wish I could love the greatest saint as much as G*d loves the greatest sinner.” (Rebbe Aaron of Karlin, d. 22 April 1772)

Appendix A

“בן זומא אומר איזהו חכם הלומד מכל-אדם; Ben Zoma said, ‘Who is wise? One who learns from every human being.’ (Talmud, *Pirkei Avot* 4:1)

“Many are the Names of G*d and infinite the Forms that lead us to know G*d. In whatsoever Name or Form you desire to call G*d, in that very Form and Name will you see G*d.” (Sri Ramakrishna)

“Do not make the fence more important than what it fences.” (Bereshit Rabbah, in responding to the Talmudic injunction – in Tractate *Avot* – to “build a fence” around the Torah)

“If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man He would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans, and in my heart He put other desires. Each man is good in His sight. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows.” (Sitting Bull, 1876)

“The essential life of Creation comes through unity, when all differences are united in one root. . . . Therefore the main principle of Torah is **Love thy fellow as thyself**, for that joins everything in love, unity, and peace. . . . This occurs when people of different opinions can come together in cooperation and harmony.” (Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov)

“All good ways are included in the One Way, and that One Way is no specialty.” (Meister Eckhart)

“The Sufi . . . can follow the Hindu way, the Muslim way, the way of any church or faith, provided he treads this royal road: that the whole universe is but an immanence of beauty.” (Hazrat Inayat Khan)

“Among the myriads of living things, in the mountains and rivers, in the trees and grasses, in the blowing wind and the sound of the rising waves, there is nothing that does not invoke the Buddha.” (Ippen, 1239-1289, founder of the Ji sect of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism)

“O G*d, where shall I find Thee? High and hidden is Thy Place. And where shall I not find Thee? Thy Glory fills the Universe.” (Judah Halevi)

“Every holy person has a different doctrine, but there is truly only one work.” (Jalal-ud-Din Rumi)

“The Light, Life and Love of G*d – which are all the same thing really – are aspects of [G*d’s] being, [G*d’s] living Presence, and will be disclosed in the silence to each soul according to its capacity and need.” (Evelyn Underhill)

“*A ’ohe pau ka ’ike halau ho’okahi*; one can learn from many sources.” (Hawaiian proverb)

“A G*d Whom one could serve only in one set way? What kind of G*d would that be?”
–Rebbe Yaakov Yitzhak of Lublin