

Dr. David Berger is the Ruth and I. Lewis Gordon Professor of Jewish History and Dean at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, Yeshiva University.

## *Review Essay:* PERSPECTIVES ON *AVODA ZARA*

Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry*.  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 265 pp.

**T**his is an extraordinary book. It addresses an issue at the very core of Judaism with wide learning, ethical sensitivity, passion, and sharp, often deep insights. I am persuaded, as we shall see, by some of those insights. In a number of instances of fundamental importance, I am not in agreement, but even with respect to those matters, I am tempted to say what James I of Aragon is reported to have told Nahmanides at the end of the Barcelona disputation: “I have never seen anyone who was incorrect who argued his case as well as you.”

In the first substantive paragraph, the author writes, “The book seeks to engage two interrelated questions—the status of Hinduism as idolatry, *Avoda Zara* in Hebrew, and a conceptual revisiting of the very category of *Avoda Zara*, with Hinduism as its test case or, if you will, its dialogue partner” (1). While I will make some observations about the key question regarding Hinduism, my primary concern—and only relevant area of expertise—is the author’s examination of *avoda zara* writ large as well as its historic application to religions other than Hinduism, most notably Christianity, which he discusses at length as the most meaningful and relevant paradigm.

Let me begin then by addressing some of the central issues raised in the book regarding the overall approach to the evaluation of *avoda zara*.

The author is deeply concerned not just with abstract questions but with their effect on human relations, and on more than one occasion he confronts the ethical impact of classifying a religion as *avoda zara*. “There are,” he says, “inevitable psychological and attitudinal implications to the determination that another religion is *avodah zarah*, unless they are kept at bay through educational [and other] strategies” (6). The question,

then, is whether those consequences should be kept at bay by such strategies or by re-thinking the definition of *avoda zara* itself. The author appears to go back and forth between emphasizing the danger posed by the use of this category and hence suggesting that one should refrain from applying it if at all possible, and recognizing that respect can be maintained without taking that step. He affirms on at least two occasions the possibility of maintaining respect for Hinduism “without necessarily foregoing the halakhic concern with *avodah zarah*” (26, and cf. 104). He is right that categorizing a religion as *avoda zara* is likely to engender an attitude marked by contempt; at the same time, I believe that he is also right about the ability to maintain respect.

In an essay on the Catholic document *Dominus Iesus*, I criticized Jews who demand on ethical grounds that Christians withdraw any expectation that Jews will recognize the truth of Christianity at the end of days. I introduced this point with a remark about my own view of Christianity that is highly relevant to the issue before us:

Properly understood, *avodah zarah* is the formal recognition or worship as God of an entity that is in fact not God. For Jews, the worship of Jesus of Nazareth as God incarnate falls within this definition. Because of the monotheistic, non-pagan character of Christianity, many Jewish authorities denied that worship of Jesus is sinful for non-Jews, though many others did not endorse this exemption. Now, let us assume that I respect the Christian religion, as I do. Let us assume further that I respect believing Christians, as I do, for qualities that emerge precisely out of their Christian faith. But I believe that the worship of Jesus as God is a serious religious error displeasing to God even if the worshipper is a non-Jew, and that at the end of days Christians will come to recognize this. Is this belief immoral? Does it disqualify me as a participant in dialogue? Does it entitle a Christian to denounce me for adhering to a teaching of contempt? I hope the answer to these questions is “no.” If it is “yes,” then interfaith dialogue is destructive of traditional Judaism and must be abandoned forthwith. We would face a remarkable paradox. Precisely because of its striving for interfaith respect and understanding, dialogue would become an instrument of religious imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

I went on to say that once I take this position, I must extend it to Christians as well, who have every right—without denigrating Judaism—to expect eschatological verification in the eyes of all humanity, including Jews.

<sup>1</sup> “On *Dominus Iesus* and the Jews,” in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 381-82.

## TRADITION

Nonetheless, as noted, I do not take the danger that Goshen-Gottstein raises lightly. He points to prophetic mockery of idols, which in my view cannot be swept aside, as he suggests, by appeal to Yehezkel Kaufmann's assertion that the prophets did not understand that the religion in question was more than fetishism. Aside from religiously motivated reluctance to ascribe prophetic rhetoric to misunderstanding, I do not believe that the range of current scholarly opinion tends in Kaufmann's direction on this point. There is, moreover, the rabbinic assertion that mockery of *avoda zara* (*laitsanuta da-avoda zara*) is permitted. It is a challenge for Jewish traditionalists to embrace the view of some later authorities that such attitudes should not apply to Christianity even if it is *avoda zara*. Nonetheless, I believe that this approach is both feasible and desirable. In connection with Hinduism, Goshen-Gottstein writes that the "willingness to explore the validity [by which he means spiritual value] of a tradition that is recognized as *avodah zarah* is in many ways a novum" (38). However, as much of the book demonstrates, this is not quite so. There is Christianity.

Another overarching question is the intersection of religious philosophy and halakha in this discourse. Almost all post-Talmudic halakhic discussion relevant to our concerns takes place in the context of Christianity. Is it proper to propose a creative new definition of *avoda zara* that would entirely exclude Christianity—and possibly, by extension, Hinduism—from that category even for a Jew despite the fact that no authority through the ages other than (probably) ha-Meiri took such a position? (An extraordinary, and in many other ways welcome, essay by R. Eliyahu Henkin may supply an additional exception, though it does not, in my view, reflect an accurate understanding of Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup>)

What makes this all the more difficult is that in Goshen-Gottstein's own view, the position that Christianity is not *avoda zara* at all cannot be understood on a theological level without a highly original appeal to what he calls a theology of imagination. In this context, the author speaks candidly of the need for what he calls theological will. Elsewhere, I have taken the position that we should endorse ha-Meiri's view requiring equal treatment of civilized non-Jews, extending his basic principle even to non-theists,<sup>3</sup> but this is very different from embracing his uniquely generous assessment (or probable assessment) of the doctrinal component of Christianity. His approach with respect to treatment of Christians was

<sup>2</sup> Eliyahu Henkin, "Qetz ha-Yamin," *Ha-Darom* 10 (Elul, 5719), 5-9.

<sup>3</sup> "Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts," in *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age*, ed. by Marc Stern (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 83-108.

endorsed by a not unimpressive array of authorities; his probable classification of Christian belief was not. No less important, the will involved in rejecting discrimination against civilized non-Jews is ethical rather than theological. It is true that the desire for mutual respect and fruitful inter-faith exchanges that drives Goshen-Gottstein's desire to reclassify Christian belief does not lack an ethical dimension, but this dimension cannot rise to the level of the will that impels us not to countenance behavior that violates our deep instincts of right and wrong. Moreover, to be fully candid, my own theological will moves me in the opposite direction, so that both my instinct and my intellect argue against the effective rejection of a near-unanimous position on the meaning of *avoda zara*. (I should note that the force of Goshen-Gottstein's theological will is so powerful that he approvingly characterizes a similar move by R. Adin Steinsaltz as brilliant while acknowledging in the same breath that it misrepresents reality [88].)

Let me return now to my rough definition of *avoda zara*, which was formulated in the context of my concern with the theology of some Chabad hasidim. *Avoda zara*, I wrote, is "the formal recognition or worship as God of an entity that is in fact not God."<sup>4</sup> I noted immediately that this definition does not extend to Maimonides's characterization of the original form of *avoda zara*, which refers to the worship of the heavenly bodies, which the worshipper himself or herself understood to be lesser beings. Nevertheless, setting aside ha-Meiri, I think that the proposed definition generally accords with the halakhic and theological positions of Jewish authorities through the ages. It follows that incarnation, not trinity, is the primary basis for considering Christianity *avoda zara*, though I recognize that there were many Jews who indeed saw the issue of Christian *avoda zara* primarily through the prism of the trinity, and this continues to be the perspective of most contemporary Jews, including distinguished rabbis. Because of what I see as the centrality of the incarnation, I think it is a significant error to decide, as Goshen-Gottstein does, that it "will be excluded from the discussion of Christianity as *avodah zarah* since most major treatments of the Christian God focus upon trinitarian faith rather than upon faith in the incarnation of one of the persons of the trinity" (224, n. 3), though he does add that he will make some comparative comments relevant to incarnation in the course of the discussion.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London and Portland, Oregon: Littman Library, 2001), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Without incarnation, the trinity could be presented in a fashion no less consistent with Jewish monotheism than the *sefirot* of the kabbalists. For sophisticated Jewish polemicists like R. Judah Aryeh (Leone) da Modena, it was the belief that one and

## TRADITION

At this point, let me make the analogy to Hinduism explicit. The basic argument that makes the denial that Hinduism is *avoda zara* possible is that believers with a true understanding of the religion see the multiple icons worshipped as manifestations of the one God. The question, then, would be: What is the status of Hindus who worship such consecrated statues with this understanding, which appears analogous to the Christian incarnation? Are they worshippers of *avoda zara*?

Let us look, then, at two passages from Jewish polemical works that illustrate the centrality of the incarnation to this discourse.

R. Joseph Kimhi wrote: “One who [mistakenly] served (*avad*) a human being [as a king] when [the latter] is [in fact] not the king would not be guilty of a capital crime, but one who worshipped (*avad*) flesh and blood instead of the living God (*Elokim hayyim*) when that person is not God (*E-lo’ah*) is guilty of a capital crime.”<sup>6</sup> It is quite clear from the context and even from the sentence itself that the person in question intends to worship the true God but has misidentified him. This is sufficient to render the worshipper an *oved avoda zara*.

We now turn to the second text. In addressing beliefs found among some contemporary Chabad hasidim, I wrote the following:

[For Jews], even the belief that the true, unitary God was incarnated in a man was enough to cross the critical line, at least if the believer was a Jew. While numerous Jewish texts assert that Christianity is *avodah zarah*, Rabbi Meir ben Shimon ha-Me’ili, a thirteenth-century Talmudist and polemicist from Narbonne, formulated the most explicit response I know to the argument that the monotheistic character of the Christian belief in incarnation should render it acceptable.

[Even non-Jews, said the Jewish protagonist, must believe] “that the world has a Creator who is one true [God], primeval with no beginning or end, who exercises providence over created beings, treating each man in accordance with his deeds.” The [Christian] responded, “We too believe this.” The [Jew] replied, “Take someone who believes this and ask him if he knows who this Being is. If he answers that he is a man born

---

only one of the divine persons took on flesh that demonstrated the incompatibility of trinitarian doctrine with a proper understanding of the unity of God. See Daniel Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford and Portland, Oregon: Littman Library, 2007), 81-82. Thus, incarnationism was in itself a theology of *avoda zara*, and it also shed light on the fundamental objectionability of trinitarianism.

<sup>6</sup> *Sefer ha-Berit u-Vikkubei Radak Im ha-Nazrut* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974), ed. by Frank Talmage, 30.

of a woman affected by all physical experiences including death—and he is the Creator God—then [that person] has denied the Creator of the world if he is mistaken.”<sup>7</sup>

Rabbi Meir was a sophisticated polemicist well aware of Christian doctrine, and he clearly asserts that a conception of the Creator that includes His embodiment in an individual who can be described as fully God effectively denies the true Deity. The passage leaves no doubt that in R. Meir’s view, worship of such a Creator constitutes *avoda zara*.

With this in mind, we turn to Goshen-Gottstein’s discussion of Maimonides’ view of Christianity. He says that Maimonides defines *avoda zara* as “the worship of any being besides God,” but, he adds, what if the practitioner of another religion is really worshipping God? (42) As we have just seen, the likely answer is that if we worship a being we believe to be the true God, and he is not, we are *eo ipso* worshipping a being other than God. Goshen-Gottstein does recognize that this approach is feasible (54) but leaves open the possibility, which at this point he deems unlikely, that Maimonides would see such a worshipper as one who is serving the true God. He goes on to assert that Maimonides’ reason for considering Christianity *avoda zara* is not entirely clear and presents various possibilities other than that it is the worship of another god.

He later formulates this argument even more strongly (134), suggesting that Maimonides could maintain that Christians recognize the true God, by which he appears to mean only the true God. He also objects to our rendering a judgment that rests on our own view of reality while setting aside the intentions of the other. But in identifying *avoda zara*, our own view of reality is of critical relevance. Moreover, he overlooks a crystal-clear affirmation by Maimonides in the uncensored text of *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4. Jesus, says Maimonides, “led most of the world astray to worship a deity other than God” (*la’avod elo’ah mi-baladei Hashem*). I think that this affirmation is based on the belief that Jesus is God, that is, on the incarnation, not the trinity. Maimonides might well have seen a trinitarian deity even without incarnation as another god, but an equivalent case can be made for his view of a God with positive attributes or feelings, not to speak of location or physical form—and he knew perfectly well that many Jews believed in such a God. I do not think he

<sup>7</sup> *The Rebbe*, 160. In a footnote, I discuss a passage where a Jew subject to an inquisitorial proceeding does assert that believing in the incarnation of the true God is not *avoda zara*.

## TRADITION

would have made this remark if the other god promoted by Christianity is other only in a sense that the God affirmed by many Jews is also other.

The author then moves to a fascinating discussion of Ramban and Rashba, who affirmed that the nations, at least ancient nations, worshipped celestial forces that were assigned to influence or govern them. The bottom line, however, as he points out, is that in neither case is there allowance for worshipping the princes or intelligences as God Himself in the sense that God is manifested in them or takes their form. I should add that Abarbanel asserts that Solomon licitly taught non-Jewish nations as well as his wives how to access the celestial forces assigned to those nations, but he sinned when he tolerated his wives' transformation of this knowledge into idolatrous rites. In any event, none of these authorities would allow non-Jews to worship Jesus as God or Hindu icons as God. As I once pointed out, however, there is a striking passage in two of R. Isaac Arama's works asserting that *avoda zara* is not prohibited to non-Jews and that they have never been punished for this sin. I do not know how he reconciled this position with Talmudic law.<sup>8</sup>

And so we come to the vexed question of *shittuf*, the association of the true God with something else. In the case of Hinduism, this could mean the true God along with a consecrated idol mistakenly believed to be a manifestation of the true God. It can also mean associating the transcendent God with other deities who exercise power of their own. Goshen-Gottstein's treatment of this central question does not rise to his usual standard. In his earliest reference (82), he states that the tosafists permitted non-Jews to worship another being like Jesus along with God, while in a footnote he indicates that the following chapter will discuss whether they have in mind Jesus or the saints. At this point, the context clearly remains worship. At the beginning of the following chapter (93), he affirms that he thinks the real meaning refers to taking an oath in the name of a saint along with God; in other words, he himself endorses the understanding of Tosafot to which he had earlier alluded in a footnote while placing the interpretation he rejects as his primary assertion in the text. In any event, the understanding that he endorses here is indeed one attested explanation, and it has nothing to do with worship. He then says (94) that if you assume the reference is to Jesus, this must mean that permission is granted to non-Jews to worship a human being. But this is

<sup>8</sup> I discussed Abarbanel and Arama in "The Wisest of All Men': Solomon's Wisdom In Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Kings," in David Berger, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation: Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 228-29.

by no means the case. Many authorities believed that the reference is to Jesus but understood the permissive position of Tosafot to be restricted to allowing non-Jews to take an oath in the name of God while also having Jesus in mind, not to worship him along with God. The failure to understand this Tosafot fully leads the author to attach somewhat exaggerated significance to a truly important assertion, to wit, that even though Christians have Jesus in mind when they say “God” in an oath, their intention is also to the Creator of heaven and earth. The function of this remark, despite its great intrinsic significance, is limited to the affirmation that when Christians say “God” and think of Jesus, they are not actually pronouncing the name of another god. Tosafot is not saying, as the author appears to maintain, that the fact that they have the Creator in mind “prevails over the theological error of considering Jesus as God” in the sense that it challenges the classification of Christianity as *avoda zara*.

In addition to this passage in Tosafot, Goshen-Gottstein also points to a tosafist assertion<sup>9</sup> that “the gentiles among us do not worship *avoda zara*” (*kim lan be-gavvayhu de-la palhei la-avoda zara*), which he understandably takes to mean that Christians do not engage in *avoda zara* by virtue of their religion. He then needs to explain why this remark was not applied broadly in other contexts. This sentence, however, does not mean what it seems to say. The formulation is based on a Talmudic passage (*Avoda Zara* 65a) about a single gentile who does not worship *avoda zara*, where it certainly does not mean that the religion of his environment was not idolatrous. When one examines other authorities such as Ramban, Rosh, and Ritva who essentially made the same assertion in the same context with more or less the same language, it is evident that they were asserting that contemporary Christians were in their view not pious enough to thank their god on their holidays because of a completed business transaction. In context, this is sufficient to generate the necessary legal consequence. Ramban added that contemporary gentiles do not actually offer sacrifices; all they do is pour a bit of wine.<sup>10</sup> The basis for dismissing the significance of the wine is not easy to determine, but it remains clear that the assertion in question is not a characterization of the Christian religion.

Goshen-Gottstein’s effort to construct a theology of *shittuf* is, I think, justified and very interesting, but we should not lose sight of the fact that the rabbinic authorities who permit *shittuf* never did this. He does point to the intriguing positions that the Hazon Ish expressed in his analysis of the Tosafot permitting *shittuf*. As Goshen-Gottstein sees it,

<sup>9</sup> *Avoda Zara* 2a, s.v. *asur*.

<sup>10</sup> *Hiddushei Ramban ha-Shalem*, *Avoda Zara* 13a.

## TRADITION

Hazon Ish's assertion that "the foundation of *avoda zara* is the confusion of creator and creature" means that worshipping a created being as God is *avoda zara*, but worship of a human being believed to be a manifestation of God's full divinity would not be *avoda zara* (170). I have already presented the historic Jewish rejection of this position, but was it that of Hazon Ish? For this to be true of Hazon Ish, who forbade gentile *shittuf* as *avoda zara* in the context of Tosafot's discussion of Christianity, we would have to assume that he believed that Christians understand Jesus to be a separate deity rather than a manifestation of God. I regard this as improbable, and I think that a careful reading of the entire passage rules out the view that the author attributes to him. Goshen-Gottstein goes on to point out Hazon Ish's striking assertion that the worship of an imaginary entity to which one attributes divine power is theological heresy (*minut*) but not *avoda zara* and his remarkable suggestion that although such *minut* in the form of worship is forbidden to non-Jews even in the context of *shittuf*, the mere belief in such *minut* may not be forbidden to them at all as long as they also believe that the true God was involved in revealing their commandments. It remains to be re-emphasized that Jesus *is* worshipped, was not an imaginary entity, and Hazon Ish asserts, with Jesus almost certainly in mind, that even death does not change a real entity into an imaginary one.<sup>11</sup>

I have already noted the importance of ha-Meiri to this discourse, and at this point we are treated to a full chapter presenting a nuanced and stimulating analysis of the figure who is best suited to provide a precedent for a reconsideration of the meaning of *avoda zara*. However, I remain unpersuaded that there are clear grounds for going beyond the already wide-ranging theological reconsideration of Christianity attributed to ha-Meiri by Moshe Halbertal,<sup>12</sup> and this reconsideration was in any event not endorsed by any significant rabbinic authority, though ha-Meiri's insistence on non-discriminatory behavior toward Christians decidedly was. Moreover, as I also noted earlier, Goshen-Gottstein himself acknowledges the difficulty of translating ha-Meiri's position into plausible theological terms.

Before concluding with a general observation, let me comment on a more focused point that periodically makes its appearance in the book. In evaluating a religion's status as *avoda zara*, does one privilege the understanding of sophisticated thinkers or does one take into account the beliefs of ordinary practitioners? In the realm of theology, I think it is the

<sup>11</sup> *Hazon Ish, Yoreh De'ah* 62:19-23.

<sup>12</sup> *Bein Torah le-Hokhmah: Rabbi Menahem ha-Me'iri u-Ba'alei ha-Halakhah ha-Maimunim bi-Provence* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 80-108.

leading authorities who count. In the realm of halakha, the practitioners matter. The context of this discussion is the controversy that roiled the Orthodox community with respect to the use of wigs made from hair ritually removed in a Hindu temple. If it is the case—and Goshen-Gottstein leaves this somewhat ambiguous—that most or a very large number of people who leave their hair at this temple do not properly understand the role of the one God in their religion, the stringent ruling regarding wigs that he and others treat dismissively, almost contemptuously, becomes eminently defensible, and rejecting it would have to rest on other grounds.

Goshen-Gottstein himself maintains (123) that the voice of learned Hindus who recognize the ultimate unity of God is sufficient. R. Menashe Klein permitted the wigs in question in part on the grounds that only the position of the religious authorities matters, but his argument rests on their assertion that the hair is not a sacrifice. In light of this assertion, he says, even an intended sacrifice by a layperson would be an act that does not constitute the standard method of worship in that religion.<sup>13</sup> The issue for him is not the monotheistic theology of sophisticated Hinduism. He does not deal directly with the nature of the religion itself, and it is rather clear that he takes its status as *avoda zara* for granted.

And so I move to my concluding remarks. The author's final discussion experiments with the assessment of a religion as *avoda zara* on the basis of its morality, its overall purposes, its body of spiritual teachings, and the presence of models of spiritual excellence who can inspire others toward higher goals (200). These are all appropriate criteria for forming our attitude toward a religion; they are not, in my view, grounds for determining *avoda zara*, and the bulk of this book makes it clear that the author cares deeply about traditional standards. Thus, a fair assessment of the book's argument requires us to judge this final set of suggestions *le-kaf zekhut* and see it as a stimulating effort to enrich the thesis on its margins but not as a proposal to replace the traditional criteria with which the author has wrestled throughout his presentation.

This work challenges us to broaden our horizons in considering the spiritual value and theological sophistication of religions other than our own. It succeeds admirably in achieving this end. It also forces us to undertake a salutary examination of one of the central categories in Judaism. In the final analysis, however, our initial instinct that the worship of human beings or icons that are believed to be a full manifestation of the one Creator God should be classified as *avoda zara* must remain intact.

<sup>13</sup> The responsum is available at [http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~spotter/sheitel/Mishne\\_Halachos\\_-\\_Tshuva\\_Sheitel.pdf](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~spotter/sheitel/Mishne_Halachos_-_Tshuva_Sheitel.pdf).