Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in the Early Modern Period: Change or Continuity?

Daniel J. Lasker

I

The Jewish-Christian debate goes back to the origins of Christianity. Jews are portrayed in the New Testament as questioning both Jesus’ messianic status as well as the claim that he was resurrected from the dead. As adherers to a religion which emerged from Judaism, early Christians found it necessary to write polemical treatises attacking Judaism, probably more for purposes of self-definition than in the hope of converting Jews. As Christians developed a genre of *Adversus Judaeos* literature, attacking Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and accusing Jews of willful blindness, Jews generally did not react. Although there are anti-Christian statements in the Talmud and some *midrashim*, supplemented by the anti-Christian parody *Toledot Yeshu* (‘The Story of Jesus’), in the first eight centuries of Christianity, there was no sustained and comprehensive Jewish critique of this religion.

The situation changed in the ninth century, when Jewish authors, writing in Arabic in Islamic countries, began to compose treatises specifically intended to refute the claims of Christianity. As the centers of Jewish life moved from the realm of Islam to the realm of Christianity, and as the pressure on Jews in those countries to convert to Christianity became more pronounced, a genre of Hebrew polemics was developed. The first such literary works date from the twelfth century, but there

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was a rapid growth in the number of treatises in the thirteenth century. In that century Christians organized public disputations attempting to demonstrate to Jews the truth of Christianity and to undermine the status of rabbinic literature (Paris 1240 and Barcelona 1263). By the time of the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, there were a large number of Jewish compositions which defended Judaism against Christian claims and argued against Christian doctrines. These treatises, written in different styles and employing diverse polemical techniques, mirrored the Christian anti-Jewish polemical literature which proliferated as the debate intensified.2

Although the Jewish-Christian debate is characterized by a wide range of arguments derived from exegesis, history and reason, it might be possible to summarize each side’s position as follows: The Christians believed that Jews are blind to the true meaning of their own Scriptures, which, if read correctly, point inexorably to the coming of Jesus of Nazareth as the messiah. Their rejection of this doctrine has resulted in a long, unending exile, in which they are punished for their refusal to become Christians. The commandments of the Hebrew Bible, which were originally promulgated both to punish the Jews and to prefigure the advent of Jesus, have been superseded by the new covenant established between God and all humanity with the sacrificial crucifixion of the God-man messiah. Christians, who have accepted this new covenant which wipes away the stain of original sin, have been rewarded with temporal success. As long as Jews continue to read the Bible carnally and not spiritually, they have no hope of success in this world or redemption in the world to come.

The Jewish response centered on what they perceived as the Christian

distortion of the Bible, based as it were on an allegorical reading of that which should be taken literally and a literal reading of that which should be taken allegorically. The messianic hopes as expressed in the Bible, namely, world peace, the ingathering of the exiled Jews, and Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel centered round the Temple in Jerusalem, remained unfulfilled. If anything, Jesus’ life and the religion based on it led to the exact opposite of the prophets’ visions. Thus, Jesus could not have been the messiah, let alone God, as the Christians claimed. Christian theology, including the notion of a triune God, one person of which became incarnate in a human, is irrational and incoherent. The commandments of the Hebrew Bible are eternally valid, and their observance leads to human perfection. Christianity, in contrast, leads to immorality as demonstrated by the life styles of its adherents. Temporal success is not a measure of divine pleasure; Jewish suffering in this world will be compensated in the next.3

In the sixteenth century, the European world changed. On the political front, it was a period of the development of the modern nation-state. In geo-political terms, it was the age of discovery, which exposed Europeans to new territories and people. Most significantly for the discussion here is the fact that the sixteenth century saw the Catholic hegemony in Western Christendom come to an end. No longer could a monolithic Catholic Church impose its will by means of both secular authorities and a religious Inquisition. With the spread of new Christian denominations, Jews were no longer the only religious minority in Europe. Protestant arguments against Catholicism, such as those which underlay the rejection of the doctrine of Transubstantiation, mirrored medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemics. The Protestants themselves were of the opinion that their newly cleansed form of Christianity would be attractive to Jews, who, from the Protestant point of view, were partially justified in refusing to convert to Catholic Christianity. When Jews were no more attracted to Protestant Christianity than to Catholicism, they were the object of renewed attack. Given these changes brought about by the onset of modernity, which were well recognized in the Jewish community, it is reasonable to ask whether one can

detect any changes in Jewish polemics against Christianity during the same period. The present article will be devoted to an examination of this question.⁴

Our discussion of the possible changes in Jewish anti-Christian polemics in the early modern period will be based on an examination of the works of four authors, Isaac ben Abraham of Troki (d. 1594); Judah Aryeh (Leone) Modena (1571-1648); Barukh (Benedict) Spinoza (1632-1677); and Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). This list is quite diverse; these four authors wrote in four different countries and cultural environments over the course of 200 years. Isaac of Troki was a Karaite Jew; Spinoza was an excommunicated Jew. Although Isaac of Troki and Modena wrote in Hebrew, the traditional languages of the Jewish side of the debate, Spinoza generally wrote in Latin and Mendelssohn in German. All four, however, inherited the medieval Jewish tradition of anti-Christian polemics and employed its arguments in their own approaches to Christianity.

II

Isaac ben Abraham of Troki was a member of the thriving Karaite community of Lithuania and a leading Karaite intellectual. During his lifetime, there was a fierce struggle in his country between reformers of various types and the Catholic Church, which eventually emerged triumphant. His polemical work, Ḥizzuq Emunah, consists of two parts, a defense of Jewish interpretations of verses from the Hebrew Bible against Christian exegesis, and an attack on the New Testament. As such, it provides an encyclopedic overview of Jewish exegetical arguments against Christianity and was both popular and influential.⁵


⁵ For more details and further bibliography, see G. Akhiezer’s article in this volume. In the present study I use the following Hebrew edition of Ḥizzuq Emunah: D. Deutsch ed. and trans., Sohrau 1873 (including a German translation). The English rendition, Faith Strengthened, Moses Mocatta trans., London 1851 (with a number of reprints), is more of a paraphrase than a literal translation.
Isaac was well aware of internal Christian struggles, and he took advantage of these disagreements when presenting his arguments against Christianity. For instance, at the very beginning of his treatise, Isaac made reference both to the Lutheran and the Greek Orthodox clergy, arguing against the latter that Christian strength cannot be employed as proof of Christian truth in light of Greece’s occupation by Muslim Turks. In other sections, he compared traditional Christian doctrines to those of Unitarian and other non-conventional Christian groups. He often cited contemporary Christian literature as well. At first glance, it might seem that the polemical use of Christian diversity, something which was not possible under monolithic Catholicism, and intimate Jewish knowledge of Christian literature are signs of polemical innovation. In truth, the use of Christian diversity as an argument against the truth of that religion is a throwback to arguments offered by Jewish polemicists under Islam, with reference to the various Christian sects at the time. Furthermore, many earlier Jewish polemicists were well familiar with Christian theological literature, which they obviously studied for the purposes of refuting Christian doctrines. One can discern a new context of the Jewish-Christian debate in Ḥizzuq Emunah, but the basic argumentation remained unchanged.6

III
Judah Aryeh (Leone) Modena has often been considered the first modern rabbi. A leader of the Jewish community in Venice, he is known both for his checkered life and his prolific writings, including a guide to Jewish ritual written specifically for a Christian audience. He also began, but did not complete, an anti-Christian polemic, Magen va-Ḥerev (‘Shield and Sword’). This work has five extant chapters, attacking the

Christian doctrines of original sin, the Trinity, Incarnation, virgin birth, and the nature of the messiah. Unlike Isaac of Troki’s *Hizzuq Emunah*, which was based mainly upon exegetical arguments derived from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, *Magen va-Herev* turns to rational arguments to attack Christian doctrines (as well as comparisons between Christian doctrines and Jesus’ own beliefs as found in the New Testament). Modena was well familiar with Christian theological literature which he cited extensively, most notably Pietro Galatino’s *De Arcanis Catholicae Veritatis*.

Although Modena’s polemic looks very much like its medieval models, Talya Fishman and Alessandro Guetta have argued that Modena was engaged in more than polemics in his *Magen va-Herev*. They both understand this work as part of a new Jewish discourse about Christianity in the early modern period. Fishman, for instance, concluded that Modena ‘was inclined to find common ground between Jews and Christians’, and his treatise was ‘designed to teach Jewish readers that Christianity had changed’.

Two main examples are adduced to illustrate Modena’s new approach to Christianity. The first is Modena’s evaluation of the Trinity as a possibly acceptable doctrine. In the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophical polemicists against the Trinity generally asserted that the belief in a triune God was not only impossible but also, indeed, incoherent. They were aware that certain Jewish views of divine attributes might be misunderstood as bordering on the doctrine of the Trinity, and, hence,

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10 Fishman (above, n. 8), pp. 174, 178 (emphasis in the original).
they went to great lengths to show the dissimilarity between acceptable divine attributes and the Christian Trinity. In contrast, Modena wrote that if the three persons were understood as internal aspects (*infra*, in Modena’s Hebrew), that would be acceptable. Only when they are considered external (*extra*) are they unacceptable. After all, Modena continued, Jews accepted the notion that God is intellect, the subject of intellection and the object of intellection (*sekhel, maskil, mushkal*). Yet, an examination of the earlier polemical literature demonstrates that one of the major divergences of Christian Trinitarianism from Jewish theology revolves around the Christian doctrine that one of the persons of the Trinity, the Son, became incarnate. What was intolerable to the medievals was not so much a God with certain internal aspects; it is the nature of these internal aspects which makes the difference. This is Modena’s position as well. Perhaps his method of expression is slightly different from the medieval prototypes, but, to my mind, there is no innovation here. A perusal of the full context of Modena’s statement – coming on the heels of his assertion that the doctrine of the Trinity is incoherent and that the notions of trinity and unity are contradictory, and preceding a denial of Incarnation – as well as a comparison with other polemical works, indicate that Modena’s statement on the Trinity is not an attempt to make Christianity more appealing to Jews.¹¹

The other example adduced to indicate Modena’s attempt at rapprochement between Jews and Christians is his explanation of Jesus’ ministry in the context of Second Temple sectarianism. Rather than accusing Jesus of nefariousness, or retelling his biography by reference to *Toledot Yeshu* (use of which he apparently condemns), Modena gave an historical analysis of how Jesus fit into the broader picture of Jewish history and the development of different forms of Judaism. Here, too, there is nothing particularly new, other than a greater historical consciousness which is reflective of the early modern period. 

¹¹ Modena’s chapter on the Trinity can be found in *Magen va-Hebrew* (above, n. 7), pp. 21-33, and in the English translation, pp. 36-68. The citation presumably allowing a belief in the Trinity is on p. 25 (English, pp. 46-47). See Fishman’s discussion (above, n. 8), pp. 173-175. For earlier Jewish sources, see my *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (above, n. 2), pp. 45-105 (Modena is discussed on pp. 81-82).
distinction between Jesus, the faithful Jew who said that he had not come to abolish the Law (Matt. 5:17), and later Christians who abandoned Judaism, can be found in Jewish writings as early as the ninth century. This theme is particularly important in the polemical work of the fourteenth-century Profiat Duran who distinguished between Jesus who had certain unconventional ideas, but was otherwise a good, observant Jew, and Paul who founded Christianity. While a number of medieval polemicists did insult Jesus on the model of *Toledot Yeshu*, this was certainly not universal. To say that Modena ‘made no secret of his sympathy for the historical Jesus’, is certainly exaggerated.\(^\text{12}\)

If Modena were not attempting to bring Jews to a greater appreciation of Christianity, why did he include statements which could be misinterpreted by his readers? The most likely answer is that Modena’s audience was made up of sophisticated Italian Jews who understood that there were Jewish concepts of a God with multiple aspects (thus, the need to emphasize the difference between acceptable and unacceptable multiple aspects); and who would not have appreciated the traditional insults of Jesus (thus, a less vituperative view of him). Good polemicists fashion their arguments to meet the needs of the time, and reflect the assumptions of their audiences.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{12}\) The discussion of Jesus’ ministry is in *Magen va-Ḥerev*, pp. 43-44 (English, pp. 94-97); Guetta’s interpretation of this section is in his Hebrew article (above, n. 9), pp. 80-84 (English article, pp. 309-313). See also Fishman (above, n. 8), pp. 160-171. Dawud al-Muqammi in the ninth century distinguished between Jesus and Paul; see B. Chiesa and W. Lockwood, *Yaṣṣīb al-Qirqisānī on Jewish Sects and Christianity*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, pp. 135-39. P. Duran’s interpretation of Christian history is in his *Kelmmat ha-Goyyim* (above, n. 6).

\(^{13}\) See my ‘Popular Polemics and Philosophical Truth in the Medieval Jewish Critique of Christianity’, *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999), pp. 243-259. A good example of Modena’s adopting arguments to meet the temperament of his audience can be seen in his refutation of incarnation. Arguing that it is impossible for only one person to become incarnate, or that Jesus had two natures, human and divine, Modena repeated contentions which originally were propounded in a Judaeo-Arabic treatise, later translated as *The Book of Nestor the Priest*. The same work, however, also employs extremely vulgar arguments against incarnation, which Modena did not reproduce, most likely because they would have offended his readers. Compare the arguments in Lasker and Stroumsa (above, n. 6), vol. 1, pp. 57-58; 102-105, as adapted by Modena in *Magen va-Ḥerev*, p. 34 (English, pp. 70-71); with the vulgar arguments in *Nestor*, vol. 1, pp. 68, 115.
Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in the Early Modern Period

would be intended to induce its readers to have a more sensitive conception of that other religion seems prima facie unlikely; Modena’s *Magen va-Ḥerev* is no exception to the usual convention of the genre.  

IV

Barukh (Benedict) Spinoza, excommunicated by the Jewish community of Amsterdam in 1656, is not generally considered a Jewish polemicist against Christianity. Indeed, his writings, especially the *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*), are replete with anti-Jewish arguments, some of which mirror the medieval Christian critique of Judaism. Furthermore, unlike typical Jewish polemicists, Spinoza was not concerned that Jews remain loyal to their ancestral religion and withstand the blandishments of Christianity. Yet, nevertheless, he was apparently knowledgeable of the medieval Jewish arguments against Christianity and employed them when demonstrating the weaknesses of that religion’s doctrines. A few examples will exemplify this conclusion.

Although Spinoza did not engage in direct criticism of the New Testament to the extent to which he did concerning the Hebrew Bible (under the pretense that he was not sufficiently expert in the Greek language), his writings are full of implicit, and sometimes not merely implicit, criticism of this book and of the Christian religion. His arguments are often parallel to well-known Jewish arguments, and it would appear that their source is in the medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature.

Let us turn first to Spinoza’s comments on the New Testament. Medieval Jewish authors argued that there are irreconcilable

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15 For full documentation of Spinoza’s use of medieval polemical literature, see my ‘Barukh Spinoza and the Jewish-Christian Debate’ (Hebrew), to appear in *Rivka Horwitz Jubilee Volume*. 

477
contradictions among the different Gospels, and, therefore, the stories about Jesus are not credible. This assertion is reflected in Spinoza’s statement in TTP, chapter 12, that the Gospels tell different stories, thereby complementing each other, but only accidentally. Certainly, according to Spinoza, one would do just as well with fewer of them.16 Jewish polemicists also pointed out contradictions between Jesus’ statements and contemporary Christian praxis, especially in light of the statement in Matthew 5:17 that Jesus did not come to annul the Torah. In TTP, chapter 5, Spinoza also expressed doubt as to whether Jesus and the apostles were those who initiated Christian practices.17 In chapter 7, Spinoza stated that the morality that is implied in the verse: *If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also* (Matthew 5:39) contradicts the Law of Moses. Since Christ said that he did not come to annul the Torah of Moses (v. 17), it follows that his intention in stating this moral directive was not to legislate a law, but rather to teach a lesson.18 In essence, then, Spinoza argued, in the manner of Jewish polemicists before him, that Jesus did not establish his own new Torah in place of the Torah of Moses.

Spinoza’s references to Christian doctrines, and his negative attitude towards them, as opposed to New Testament stories, had deep roots in the polemical literature as well. Let us take, for instance, the Jewish claim that the Christian belief that Jesus was the son of God, as the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity, is both false and incoherent. Spinoza wrote in TTP, chapter 1, that in contrast to Jewish prophets, who prophesied by means of intermediaries and not directly from God, God revealed Himself to Christ ‘not by words or by visions, but directly [sine verbis, aut visionibus, sed immediate revelata sunt]’.19 Thus, it is possible to say: ‘The Wisdom of God – that is, wisdom that is more than human – took on human nature in Christ, and that Christ was the way to salvation’.20 The non-careful reader might assume

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17 TTP, pp. 66-67.
18 TTP, p. 94.
19 Citations in Latin will be taken from C. Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., Heidelberg 1925, unless otherwise noted.
from this that Spinoza adopted the doctrine of incarnation, as reflected in the Gospel of John, 1:1-4, that the wisdom of God (the logos) took on flesh in the image of Jesus.

This conclusion, however, would not be correct, and Spinoza’s view of Christ differs from that of the traditional Christian belief, for as soon as Spinoza wrote that Christ was the ‘spirit of God’, he immediately added: ‘But I must here ask it to be noted that I am certainly not alluding to the doctrines held by some Churches about Christ, nor am I denying them; for I freely confess that I do not understand them [nam libenter fateor me ea non capere].’ What is it that some churches teach which Spinoza did not understand? The answer can be found in Epistle 73 to Henry Oldenburg, in which Spinoza wrote:

As to the additional teaching of certain Churches, that God took upon himself human nature, I have expressly indicated that I do not understand what they say. Indeed, to tell the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than one who might tell me that a circle has taken on the nature of a square [imó, ut verum fatear, non minùs absurdè mihi loqui videntur, quàm si quis mihi diceret, quòd circulus naturam quadrati induerit].

Obviously, Spinoza could have refuted the incarnation without recourse to Jewish sources. The question of the status of Jesus was a central feature of theological disputes within Christianity itself. Nevertheless, what is interesting here is the comparison between the Christian doctrine of Incarnation and a logical impossibility, the squaring of a circle. These types of comparisons are made in most of the Jewish philosophical polemics in Spain from the end of the fourteenth century and the fifteenth century. The Jewish polemicists stated that a religion based upon logical contradictions, namely Christianity, could not be a true divine religion, whereas a religion based on supernatural miracles, namely Judaism, is a possible divine religion. Spinoza’s specific comparison between Christian beliefs and mathematical impossibilities can be found, for instance, in the words of Joseph Albo, in a proposition

with which he prefaced his anti-Christian polemic in Book of Principles, part 3, chapter 25:

Anything that is the subject of belief must be conceivable by the mind, though it may be impossible so far as nature is concerned … Such natural impossibilities as the dividing of the Red Sea, the turning of the rod into a serpent, and the other miracles mentioned in the Torah or in the Prophets can be conceived by the mind, hence we can believe that God has power to produce them. But a thing which the mind can not conceive, for example that a thing should be and not be at the same time, or that a body should be in two places at the same time, or that one and the same number should be both odd and even, and so on, can not be the subject of belief, and God can not be conceived as being able to do it, as God can not be conceived able to create another like Him in every respect, or to make a square whose diagonal is equal to its side, or to make now what has happened not to have happened. For since the mind can not conceive it, God can not do it, as it is inherently impossible.23

Albo distinguished between religious beliefs, which are naturally impossible, such as the splitting of the Red Sea, and those which are logically impossible, such as incarnation. Beliefs of the first type are rationally possible, and, therefore, a religion may teach them, but beliefs of the second type are rationally impossible and are, thus, disqualified. Although it would be difficult to imagine Spinoza accepting that distinction, since he did not believe in supernatural miracles, his comparison between Incarnation and squaring the circle reflects the writings of Albo and other Jewish polemicists and demonstrates Spinoza’s rejection of a central Christian tenet.

Another anti-Christian argument can be found in Spinoza’s Epistle 12a to Lodewijk Meyer. In this letter, Spinoza responded to a number of questions concerning the appendix ‘Metaphysical Thoughts’ to his book ‘Principles of Cartesian Philosophy’, in which Spinoza wrote, among other comments, that ‘the Son of God’ is equal to ‘the Father’

Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in the Early Modern Period

[filium dej esse ipsum patrem]. Apparently Meyer wished to understand what Spinoza meant by this phrase. Spinoza responded that the matter is clear: ‘Things which agree with a third thing agree with one another [quae in uno tertio convenient ea inter se convenient]’. Spinoza added that this statement was not particularly important to him, so if Meyer thought that his words would give offence to someone, he could omit them. Apparently, that is what Meyer did.24

Spinoza’s argument – namely, if the Father is God and the Son is God, then clearly the Father is the Son – echoes the one found in the Epistle Be Not Like Your Fathers of Profiat Duran. Addressing his former friend in an ironic style, Duran wrote:

Be not like your fathers who were forced by their intellects to admit the truth of rational, physical, metaphysical, logical and mathematical principles; and the derivative principles, which were derived from them. On the basis of these principles, they built an arsenal on the mountains of the intellect. They used profound discussions in order to achieve the ways and orders of logic, distinguishing between a demonstrative syllogism and that which is not demonstrative … As for you, do not act in this manner. God forbid that you should believe that the conclusions of the first mood of the first figure of the figures of the syllogisms, which is the foundation of the whole science of logic, will follow from the conditional predicated on the universal. You will be led into a denial of the faith if you should say (A) The Father is God; (B) God is the Son; this should not generate the result that (C) The Father is the Son.

Joseph ben Shem Tov (mid-fifteenth century) presented this syllogism in a slightly different manner: (A) All of the Father, and everything predicated on God, is God; (B) All of God, and everything predicated on God, is the Son; but (C) The Father is predicated on God (from A); therefore (D) The Father is the Son.25

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24 Spinoza, Letters (above, n. 22), p. 108. This epistle was not in the original editions of Spinoza’s letters, having been discovered only thirty years ago; see A. K. Offenberg, ‘Letter from Spinoza to Lodewijk Meyer, 26 July 1663’, in: Speculum Spinozanum: 1677-1977, pp. 426-435 (which is the source of the Latin citations here).

25 See Lasker, Polemics (above, n. 4), pp. 90-93, for the sources of these texts and
Spinoza, then, made reference to the logical statement that two things equal to a third thing are equal to each other, while Duran and Joseph ben Shem Tov used the more technical terms of Aristotelian logic, but the result was the same: if the Father is God and God is the Son, then the Father is the Son. The Christian belief that one can distinguish between the Father and the Son, although both of them are God, is incoherent.

Spinoza’s most concentrated and continuous criticism of Christianity is set forth in Epistle 76 addressed to Albert Burgh. Burgh had converted from Protestantism to Catholicism and wrote a long letter to Spinoza (Epistle 67) with justification for his deed, in the hope of convincing Spinoza to convert to Christianity. Spinoza started his response, which was intended to explain why he refused to become a Catholic, with the statement that he would not ‘recount the vices of priests and popes [Sacerdotum, & Pontificum vitia’], as is often done by opponents of Catholicism who have ‘unworthy motives’. The accusations of immoral behavior on the part of the Catholic clergy are included in medieval Jewish polemical compositions, beginning with Joseph Kimhi’s *Book of the Covenant* (c. 1170) and including, especially, *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, one of the most popular Jewish polemical works, written by an anonymous author in the thirteenth century. In general, Jews claimed that the declared celibacy of the priests, the monks and the nuns was fictitious, since they had sexual relations among themselves as well as with the general Christian population.

Spinoza continued the letter with a reference to the Eucharist, which according to Catholic doctrine turns into the real body of Christ. The status of the Eucharist was an important subject in the polemics between Protestants, who generally understood the changeover from bread to body in a non-literal fashion, and Catholics. In this context, Spinoza mentioned an incident in which the consecrated Eucharist was thrown to the horses in the city of Chastillon in 1635, without any disastrous explanations of the terminology. Duran’s argument was also used by other polemicists including Judah Aryeh Modena.

consequences (which one could assume there would have been if the disgraced bread were actually the body of Christ). Spinoza compared the true, infinite eternal God with the bread of the Eucharist, and called to his interlocutor: ‘O youth deprived of understanding, who has bewitched you into believing that you eat, and hold in your intestines, that which is supreme and eternal [O mente destitute juvenis, quis te fascinavit, ut summum illud, & aeternum te devourare, & in intestinis habere credas]?’ Here also Spinoza can be seen as part of the tradition of the Jewish critique of Christianity, in which there was no dearth of strong arguments against this Christian belief.29 One can also find references there to God’s being in the intestines of the believer, for instance in Profiat Duran’s ironic words: ‘And you, o brother, have saved your soul; eat and be satisfied since your savior is in your innards. Hallow and sanctify God, since the Holy One of Israel is in your midst’.30

Spinoza also brings Burgh’s claim that the general consensus of Catholics concerning the doctrines of their faith, in addition to the number of Catholics who died as martyrs to their faith, strengthens the certainty that Catholics have regarding their religion. Spinoza responded that this argument is in essence a ‘Pharisaic’ one (of rabbinic Judaism), since they also use consensus and the death of martyrs as a reliable proof. Spinoza even mentioned a Jew named Judah who was burned as a martyr while proclaiming his belief in Judaism to the very end. The claim that reliable, true tradition and Jewish readiness to die a martyr’s death prove the truth of Judaism, one of whose main sources in Judah Halevi’s Kuzari (1:48, 86, 113), is adduced here in order to say that just as Judaism is not a true religion despite its tradition and its martyrs, so, too, is Catholicism not true. Spinoza continued by saying that Catholicism is contradicted by reason and relies upon superstitions. We see, therefore, that Spinoza’s criticism of Catholicism integrates motifs taken from the Jewish critique of Christianity, with Protestant arguments against Catholicism, with rationalistic claims against religions in general. Even though he was not an anti-Christian

29 See Lasker, Polemics (above, n. 4), pp. 135-151.
30 P. Duran, Epistle Be Not Like Your Fathers (Hebrew), in: Polemical Writings (above, n. 6), p. 77. The Hebrew translated here ‘your midst’ (compare Hosea 11:9) is the same as ‘your innards’.

483
polemicist as such, he is firmly in the medieval polemical tradition, employing arguments which were made by Jews hundreds of years before Spinoza.31

V

The last thinker to be examined here is Moses Mendelssohn, the leading figure of the German Jewish Enlightenment, who devoted himself to finding a way for Jews to remain loyal to their religion in a rapidly changing world, while bidding for acceptance into the wider European culture. In general, Mendelssohn was reluctant to engage Christians in religious disputes, and one rarely considers him to be an anti-Christian polemicist. Only when his prominence made Mendelssohn the object of personal attack by Christians who wished to convert him to Christianity, did he feel a need to respond to their arguments. His responses to Christian doctrines reflect time-honored Jewish polemical themes.

In 1769, Mendelssohn was called upon to convert by Johann Casper Lavater (1741-1801), a pastor in Zurich to whom Mendelssohn had once made some positive remarks concerning Jesus. In response to Lavater’s challenge either to refute the proofs for Christianity offered by the French theologian Charles Bonnet or to embrace Christianity, Mendelssohn demurred from a direct attack on his opponent’s religion, restricting himself to an explanation of why it was imprudent to engage in such activity. Instead, Mendelssohn argued that unlike Christianity, Judaism is not a conversionary religion, and it does not deny eternal bliss to non-Jews (as Christianity does to non-Christians). Mendelssohn concluded this letter expressing his hope that he would not be forced by Lavater to demonstrate publicly the weaknesses of Bonnet’s arguments.32

31 Although it is conceivable that Spinoza borrowed some of his anti-Christian arguments (for instance, against the Trinity, Incarnation and Transubstantiation) from internal Christian debates at the time, it appears to me that the similarities between his writings and the medieval Jewish literature, with which he was undoubtedly familiar, make recourse to contemporary parallels unnecessary, even if possible.

32 The letter is translated in M. Mendelssohn, Jerusalem And Other Jewish Writings, A. Jospe trans., New York, 1969, pp. 113-122; for a discussion of the affair, and the arguments which would have been made in his ‘counterreflections’ to Bonnet
Mendelssohn’s major work of Jewish thought, *Jerusalem* (1783), was written in reaction to an attack on his assertion that Judaism is a tolerant religion, one which eschews threats of force to impose its beliefs. The author of this attack, August Friedrich Cranz, had argued that this view is a distortion of Judaism, indicating that Mendelssohn was already moving away from his ancestral beliefs and should, therefore, make a full transition to Christianity. Mendelssohn defended his interpretation of Judaism, generally avoiding a counterattack on Christianity. He did state, however, that:

> If it be true that the cornerstones of my house are dislodged, and the structure threatens to collapse, do I act wisely if I remove my belongings from the lower to the upper floor for safety? Am I more secure there? Now Christianity, as you know, is built upon Judaism, and if the latter falls, it must necessarily collapse with it into one heap of ruins.\(^{33}\)

Mendelssohn’s reluctance to engage in direct polemic against Christianity reflects both his position in German society and the need for prudence; nevertheless, it, too, has medieval precedents.\(^{34}\)

Mendelssohn did, however, explain more explicitly his objections to Christianity in a short letter to Karl-Wilhelm, hereditary prince of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1735-1806), who had asked him in 1770 why he accepted the Old Testament while rejecting both the New Testament and the proofs for Christianity found in the Old Testament.\(^{35}\)

Mendelssohn’s answers reflect typical medieval Jewish arguments against Christianity. Christian doctrines are said to be ‘an outright
contradiction of the fundamental principles of reason. I simply cannot harmonize them with anything that reason and cognition have taught me about the nature and attributes of the Deity’. Mendelssohn made the following distinction between the doctrines of Old and New Testaments: ‘The former are in harmony with my philosophical views, or at least do not contradict them, while the latter demand a faith I cannot profess’. Some of the objectionable beliefs are original sin, compensatory satisfaction for that sin, and the existence of Satan and evil spirits.\footnote{On the use of reason for polemical purposes, and the Jewish claim that Christian doctrines are irrational but Jewish ones are compatible with reason, see my ‘Averroistic Trends in Jewish-Christian Polemics in the Late Middle Ages’, Speculum 55 (1980), pp. 294-304.} Repeating a Jewish argument which goes back to the Talmud, Mendelssohn stressed that Jesus himself never called to abolish observance of the commandments.\footnote{Jewish polemicists usually cited Matt. 5:17 in this context; this is the only verse of the New Testament quoted in the Talmud (Shabbat 116b).} Mendelssohn’s formulation of why he rejects Christian proof texts from the Hebrew Bible is apparently original: ‘How unspeakably pitiful would man’s fate be if mankind’s salvation were to depend on this or that particular interpretation of some obscure passage in a book that had been written in times immemorial for one particular people in Asia, in a strange and by now dead language!’ Nonetheless, it is a variation on the theme of Jewish rejection of Christian exegesis; even the example he gives, the mysterious dreams of Daniel, is a well-known topos of the debate.\footnote{See, for example, R. Chazan, ‘Daniel 9:24-27; Exegesis and Polemics’, in: O. Limor and G. G. Stroumsa eds., Contra Iudaeos; Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews, Tübingen 1996, pp. 143-159.} Thus, Mendelssohn’s claims that Christianity is irrational and its exegesis flawed reflect typical medieval polemical themes.

VI

What can we say about Jewish-Christian polemics in the early modern period? I think that the evidence, at least the way I read it, indicates that for the Jewish defenders of Judaism very little has changed with the transition out of the Middle Ages. Some of the details of the arguments against Christianity may have changed, reflecting new historical realities, but their substance remained more or less the same.
Changes of tone or contents can be explained as reflections of the audience rather than an altered perception of the polemicists. The same conclusion can be reached concerning the impact of other central events in Jewish history, such as the Crusades or the expulsion from Spain, upon the Jewish critique of Christianity. The anti-Christian polemical themes, tactics and arguments, originally introduced by Jews in Islamic countries in the ninth and tenth centuries and developed by Jews in Christian countries in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, remained almost unchanged into the modern period.

The only real innovator discussed here is Barukh Spinoza who used medieval arguments in order to maintain that polemicists of both religions were essentially correct in their critiques of the other religion: for people who use their God given reason, both Judaism and Christianity are deficient. As to which one Spinoza saw as more deficient, I would think it is Christianity. His arguments are against the fundamental doctrines of Christianity; his criticisms of Judaism revolve around stubbornness of continued observance or the foolishness of some biblical passages. He did not accuse Jewish doctrines of being irrational. If I am correct that his disapproval of Christianity is sharper than his criticism of Judaism, then Spinoza can also be seen as part of the ongoing Jewish tradition of anti-Christian polemics, a tradition which, as I maintain, has remained essentially unchanged over time. Like Isaac ben Abraham of Troki and Judah Aryeh Modena before him, and Moses Mendelssohn after him, Spinoza’s attitude towards Christianity was molded by the traditional Jewish polemical arguments against that religion; the medieval critique of Christianity was simply recycled.

The early modern period brought many changes to Jewish life, and most Jewish literature, including polemical literature, reflects those alterations. When, however, Jews found it necessary or desirable to

criticize the majority religion, they employed the time-honored themes and ideas they found readily available in the medieval Jewish anti-Christian controversial writings.40

40 One can point to other aspects of change in the polemical literature not discussed herein, such as the use of vernaculars and the presence of a large audience of former Jews (‘Conversos’) whose existence occasioned a change in presentation and tactics in the Jewish critique of Christianity. Again, I believe such differences had only a minor impact, if at all, on the overall picture.