

Uncensored: Recovering Anti-Christian Animosity in Contemporary Rabbinic Literature*

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■ Abstract

This article focuses on the recovery of censored Jewish texts in contemporary Orthodox rabbinic literature. I show that contemporary Orthodox scholars make use of critical methods which are close to those of the historical, philological, and biblical sciences, in order to reconstruct those portions of the Jewish tradition which were omitted or transformed in the early-modern period by Christian censorship or by Jews with an “eye” to the censor. As the censored texts were mostly omitted or changed because they were recognized as offensive to Christian sensitivities, their current recovery entails also a renewed discussion of Judaism’s attitude to Christianity. I argue that the “uncensoring” of Jewish traditions is closely connected with expressions of animosity towards Christianity. The combination of this animosity with the use of modern scientific methods brings the common cultural assumptions which relate resistance to inter-faith rapprochement with “traditionalism,” and a reactionary approach to modernism, into question.

■ Keywords

Jewish-Christian relations, rabbinic literature, Orthodox Judaism, censorship, traditionalism, Judaic Studies, religious polemics

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■ Introduction

This article analyzes an under-studied phenomenon within contemporary Orthodox rabbinic literature, a phenomenon embedded between the content and method of this literature.¹ In terms of content, one may point to a sharp increase in anti-Christian statements in recent rabbinic publications. Though this polemical tone is interesting in its own right, I will argue here that it is ever more interesting in light of the methods that the authors of the aforementioned literature are using in order to justify and advance their negative theological and halakhic attitude to Christianity. In assessing Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations, rabbis and Torah scholars are using methods that show striking similarity to those used in the historical sciences, long opposed by Orthodox rabbinic authorities.² I believe that this combination of a polemical approach to Christianity with a historical-critical methodology has the potential for challenging some of our assumptions regarding processes of modernization and reaction in traditionalist religious communities, as well as providing a more sober evaluation of contemporary Jewish-Christian reconciliation.

■ Modern Historiographical Methods and Jewish-Christian Rapprochement

The modern critical methods of the historical sciences have been serving Jewish and Christian communities in diverse contexts to overcome the traditional rivalries between them and to revise their traditions in light of conciliatory modern values. One prominent example is the manner in which the post-Holocaust Catholic doctrinal revolution regarding Jews and Judaism had been nourished by the new

¹ In this article, “Orthodox literature” is not a synonym for a literature written by Orthodox people but stands for literature that is written within a certain religious tradition, within an “Orthodox” framework, and has religious purposes. This is a variation on Marc Shapiro’s distinction between “Orthodox history” and “Orthodox historians,” acknowledging that different Orthodox people can entertain different approaches to the past, more or less scientific, more or less dogmatic. See Marc Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015) 1 n. 2.

² On the sophisticated Orthodox resistance to *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the 19th cent., see Israel Bartal, “True Knowledge and Wisdom: On Orthodox Historiography,” in *Reshaping the Past: Jewish History and the Historians* (ed. Jonathan Frankel; Studies in Contemporary Jewry 10; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 178–92; on the resistance to the Haskalah and to science in general, see Shmuel Feiner, “‘To Eradicate Wisdom from the World’: The Jewish Enemies of the Enlightenment and the Origins of the Ultra-Orthodox,” *Alpayim* 26 (2004) 166–90 (Hebrew); on other critics of modern Jewish historiography, see David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Though the Orthodox resistance to modern historicism and to the academic study of Scriptures and rabbinic sources has been largely maintained in the ultra-Orthodox world to this day, recent developments in contemporary attitudes of Haredi society to academic Judaic studies are still under-studied. See Kimmy Caplan, “heqer haḥeḥbrah haḥaredit beyisra’el, me’afeynim, heḥegim ve’etgarim,” in *Israeli Haredim: Integration without Assimilation?* (ed. Kimmy Caplan and Emmanuel Sivan; Ra’anana: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2003) 258–60 (Hebrew).

openness of the Catholic Church to biblical criticism.³ As Hans Urs von Balthasar argued in 1958, it is by virtue of having pulled the carpet from under the traditional idea of Scripture's divine origins that biblical studies showed Christians the depth of their debt to Jewish tradition.⁴ Through the historical contextualization of Scripture, Catholic theologians have acknowledged the existence of intimate connections between the sacred texts and the people who put them in writing. These new scholarly insights led them to revise their concept of Jewish-Christian relations from one of break and replacement to one of continuity and a Judeo-Christian common heritage.⁵

The contextualization and the historicization of traditional Catholic sources also assisted Catholic theologians and church officials who sought reconciliation with the Jews in marginalizing the anti-Jewish aspects of the Christian tradition, and in regarding them as insubstantial and contingent, dependent on the cultural and social circumstances in which they were composed. This was the case in the composition of *Nostra Aetate* #4, the Second Vatican Council's document on Jews and Judaism (1965): Cardinal Augustin Bea, president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity at Vatican II (and previously the rector of the *Biblicum*) who was responsible for formulating the Council's schema, managed to exempt the Jews from the deicide accusation by distinguishing between the Gospels' account of the passion, and later, postscriptural interpretations of the passion story that have burdened the sources with hostile, anachronistic interpretations.⁶ The same methodology was at work in the 1985 document by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, according to which: "Certain controversies [in the Gospels] reflect Christian-Jewish-relations long after the time of Jesus. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today."⁷ The modern historical-critical gaze—sorting tradition into different periods and layers—was thus crucial for uprooting anti-Jewish threads from Christian tradition and transforming the perception of "Judeo-Christian" relationship from one of conflict to one of closeness.

³ Approval for applying modern methods of biblical exegesis was first given by Pope Pius XII, in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. See John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 84. See also Benedict T. Viviano, OP, "The Renewal of Biblical Studies in France 1934–1954 as an Element in Theological *Ressourcement*," in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 305–17.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Martin Buber on Christianity: A Dialogue between Israel and the Church* (trans. Alexander Dru; London: Harvil Press, 1961) 21–22.

⁵ Examples for this Catholic trajectory are abundant. See, for instance, Jean Daniélou, *Théologie du judéo-christianisme* (Paris: Desclée, 1958), and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (trans. Hubert Hoskins; London: Collins, 1979).

⁶ Bea summarizes his arguments in *La Chiesa e il popolo ebraico* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1966).

⁷ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church," 24 June 1985, sec. 4, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html.

Yet, this conciliatory effect of the application of modern historical-critical methods to traditional texts in the realm of Jewish-Christian relations was not an innovation of Catholics in the post-Holocaust era but had other, earlier variations. Mutatis mutandis, the founders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism) in the Jewish-German milieu of the nineteenth century had been using similar historiographical methods for similar purposes. By turning Judaism into an object of science, they sought to dissolve the alienation of the Jews from their European surroundings and to replace segregation with integration into the enlightened Christian society.⁸ Applying historiographical methods to Jewish rabbinic literature,⁹ they undermined the authority of the rabbis who interpreted the texts as containing ahistorical and immutable meanings and offered a reading that was more fitting to the values of *Aufklärung* and for supporting the cause of emancipation.¹⁰ The contextualization and the historicization of rabbinic literature allowed the pioneers of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to pick and choose from rabbinic tradition what they had deemed as still relevant, establishing a comprehensive synergy with the Protestant scholarship of their time, and ultimately deeming the traditional antagonism to Christianity as obsolete.¹¹

Transcending Jewish-Christian mutual exclusion and hostility, on the one hand, and adopting, instead, the scientific, secularizing gaze on history, on the other, were two related aspects of the modernization of Judaism in the nineteenth century, as they became, more recently, two related aspects of Catholic *aggiornamento*.

Yet, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi argued in *Zakhor*, the replacement of the traditional approach to traditional texts with the modern, historicizing approach to them—even if it was meant for the preservation of Jewish literature and existence—implied, to a great extent, a radical break from the existential continuum of Judaism

⁸ Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry 19; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994) 158–76.

⁹ The first to make rabbinic, postbiblical Judaism into an object of science was Leopold Zunz, in his *Etwas über die rabbinische Litteratur* (1818).

¹⁰ On the method of *Wissenschaft*, see Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal, *The Verein: Pioneers of the Science of Judaism in Germany* (Jerusalem: Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem and Zalman Shazar Center, 2018) 325–33 (Hebrew).

¹¹ This does not imply that the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars did not conduct polemics with Christians; their entire project could be conceptualized as an attempt to present an alternative to the way Protestant scholars have perceived Jewish history and literature. Yet the aim of this polemic was to present to European culture a tolerable version of Judaism that would have a place within an enlightened Protestant milieu. For the polemical strategies of the *Wissenschaft* pioneers against their Protestant counterparts, see, for example, Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Alexandra Zirkle, “Heinrich Graetz and the Exegetical Contours of Modern Jewish History,” *JQR* 109 (2019) 360–83. On the Protestant theological foundations of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, see Elizabeth Johnston, “Semitic Philology and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Revisiting Leopold Zunz’s *Etwas über die rabbinische Litteratur*,” *Philological Encounters* 2 (2017) 296–320.

and a shift toward an entirely different *Weltanschauung*.¹² In the lamenting words of Baruch Kurtzweil:

The historicization of Judaism had returned it and abandoned it to a temporary life after depriving it of eternal life. . . . Jewish revival in terms of secular historicity has accepted the death of Judaism as an eternal demand; it accepted, silently, the omission of eternity as an existential category of the People.¹³

Historians of modern Judaism differ as to where the roots of this radical transition to the modern, scientific perspective on Jewish history and literature lay. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin argued that the early origins of Judaic studies in the modern sense long antedated nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, existing already in early modern European press shops that printed rabbinic literature under the scrutinizing gaze of the Christian censor. The censor and the Jews, who had to adapt their literature to the sensitivities of early modern Christians, worked shoulder to shoulder in “the establishment of a Judaism that is not based on the polemic with Christianity and that is devoid of elements that might be considered demonic or irrational.”¹⁴ The elimination of anti-Christian notions was thus only a part of an encompassing adaptation of Jewish literature to the early modern European context, in such a way that Judaism would not blatantly contradict Christian values, while still maintaining its right to “an autonomous Jewish space, albeit marginal.”¹⁵

Paraphrasing Carlo Ginzburg, Raz-Krakotzkin states that the Jewish historian—to this very day—stands, in a sense, behind the ear of the Christian censor—who was often a convert from Judaism. Jewish historians are the inheritors of the convert censor’s ambivalence toward rabbinic literature; the censor both legitimized the sources and castrated them, as he stood both within the Jewish tradition and outside of it. Similarly, modern Jewish historiography is also expropriating the texts from their faith-based readership and making them into an object of external curiosity:

To a certain extent, [the historian] shares the censor’s values and aims, as he too seeks to integrate Jewish history and Jewish literature into a common cultural framework by adopting the conception and tools of hegemonic European culture.¹⁶

¹² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982) 77–103. Amos Funkenstein fundamentally disagrees with Yerushalmi’s “break” thesis. For him, there is much more continuity between the modern, secularized, and scientific Jewish perspective on history and the historical perspectives that characterized the Jewish tradition in premodern times; see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 10–21. See also Myers, *Resisting History*, 1–12.

¹³ Baruch Kurtzweil, *bem’abaq ‘al ‘erḳey hayahadut* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1969) viii.

¹⁴ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century* (trans. Jackie Feldman; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) 177.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

The ambivalence of the censor, and by analogy of the Jewish historian, is closely associated with the overcoming of the polemical, anti-Christian components in rabbinic literature, which were at odds with the censor's Christian sensitivities no less than they are at odds with the modern, liberal sensitivities of us academics integrated into an enlightened, egalitarian, and postpolemical world.

This gap between the polemical, premodern past and the conciliatory, emancipatory scientific historical present is also reflected in Israel Yaakov Yuval's *Two Nations in Your Womb*. In a subchapter titled "The Conciliatory Approach of Modern Research," Yuval justifies his historiographical project of surfacing subtle late-antique rabbinic polemics against Christianity by declaring the end of the *actual* polemic between Christians and Jews. Only when that mutual antagonism between Jews and Christians had finally been resolved (as witnessed, according to Yuval, in the fourth section of the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate*), could historians enjoy "a certain remove" that allows us to cast a direct gaze on these sensitive issues "that were once discussed in whispers in private chambers or known only to a chosen few." Modern Jewish historiography is defined here once more as linked to the overcoming of the Jewish-Christian polemic and is dedicated to the cause of neutralizing the polemical aspects of rabbinical tradition from any existential poignancy.¹⁷

In accordance with this perspective, it would have been reasonable to assume that those Jewish groups that still resist the modern historiographical gaze on Jewish history and literature, i.e., rabbis and Torah scholars who are invested in "orthodox history," would also reject Jewish-Christian reconciliation and hold fast to premodern antagonistic perspectives on Christianity. Even if these communities are open—as not uncommon in fundamentalist communities—to using the fruits of modern science, they reject the humanities, which they identify as inseparable from the foreign set of modern values they strive to resist.¹⁸ As Marc Shapiro has convincingly demonstrated, the historical perception of Orthodox rabbis and Torah scholars is still very much at odds with mainstream modern historical perceptions, and certainly with the work of professional historians; ultra-Orthodox circles often cultivate a different concept of historical truth, willing to manipulate historical facts to preserve and maintain their ideology and sense of identity.¹⁹

In these very same Orthodox circles, one also recognizes a general antagonism toward interreligious dialogue, and toward dialogue with Christianity in particular. Contemporary halakhic writings tend to consider Christians as idolaters, that is, they depict Christianity as a harmful religious phenomenon that should eventually disappear.²⁰ Scholars usually overlook this tendency, probably because a small

¹⁷ Israel Yaakov Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 20–21.

¹⁸ Caplan, "heqer hahebrah haaharedit," 258.

¹⁹ Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable*, 7–26.

²⁰ There is plenty of evidence for the dominance of this halakhic perception. See, for example,

group of Orthodox rabbis who favor Jewish-Christian dialogue tends to be much more visible on the international stage than the vast majority of their peers.²¹ This pro-dialogue group is in fact a small community within the greater Orthodox congregation. As I show in this article, a close reading of theological and halakhic discussions within the ultra-Orthodox community points in a rather different direction.

When taken together, these phenomena—Orthodox resistance to critical historiographical methods and Orthodox resistance to Jewish-Christian rapprochement—might suggest that it is precisely the rejection of the modern attitude to history that allows Orthodox Torah scholars to ignore the historical fact of Jewish-Christian reconciliation, and to hold fast to the axiom that “It is a well known halakha that Esau hates Jacob”²² as immutable truth. Thus, if (or when) Orthodox communities would have bothered to undergo *aggiornamento* of their historical perspectives like their Catholic counterparts, they would have understood that the rivalry between Christians and Jews is not a fixed, eternal truth but merely a historical phase—a phase that now, when Christianity no longer poses a threat to Judaism, has ceased to be relevant. In other words, one would expect that a grain of historical criticism would emancipate orthodox Jews from the haunting shadow of the past and hasten their jumping on the wagon of interfaith friendships.²³

²¹ ‘Oḥadyah Yosef, [Responsa] *yehaveh da’at* (Jerusalem: 1980) 4.45; *yabia’ omer* (vol. 2; Jerusalem: Yeshivat Porat Yosef, 1955), yoreh de’ah 11. Yosef did allow entrance to a mosque, since the Muslims are not considered to be idolaters. See *yabia’ omer* (vol. 4; Jerusalem: Yeshivat Porat Yosef, 1959), yoreh de’ah 15. See also Menashe Klein, [Responsa] *mišneh halaḳot* (Jerusalem: *maḳon mišneh halaḳot gedolot*, 2002) 16.6:86; Yehuda Herzl Henkin, [Responsa] *bney banim* (Jerusalem: *šur-ot*, 1997) 3.35; Eliezer Waldenberg, [Responsa] *šiš eli’ezer*, (Jerusalem: E. Waldenberg, 1998) 14.91; Moshe Feinstein, [Responsa] *igrot mosheh* (Bnei-Berak: *yeshivat ohel yosef*, 1980), yoreh de’ah 3.129; *ibid.*, 3.43. Some prominent examples are collected in Aviad HaCohen, “Modern Rabbinical Conceptions of Christians and Christianity: From Rabbi Kook to Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef,” *Mahanaim: A Review for Jewish Thought and Culture* 15 (2004) 89–124 (Hebrew), and in my book *Pottage of Lentils*, 208–20.

²² The most prominent example for this pro-dialogue group’s presence on the international stage is the recent declaration published by an international group of Orthodox rabbis through the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation (CJUC), “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians,” 3 December 2015, <https://www.cjcr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/orthodox-2015dec4>. This declaration entertains a positive theological and halakhic evaluation of Christianity. There are, of course, other Orthodox initiatives for the promotion of Jewish-Christian relations, but most of these carefully avoid discussing the halakhic and theological status of Christians and confine themselves to diplomatic gestures and joint declarations on common values. See, e.g., the joint declaration by the Conference of European Rabbis, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Rabbinical Council of America, “Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*,” https://www.cjcr.us/images/From_Jerusalem_to_Rome.pdf. However, halakhic and theological literature that is meant for intracommunal readership usually reflects a more negative attitude.

²³ Rashi’s commentary on Gen 33:4, paraphrasing Sifre to Num 9.

²⁴ This is HaCohen’s approach in “Modern Rabbinical Conceptions.” See also Yosef Salmon, “Christians and Christianity in Halachic Literature from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Middle of the Nineteenth Century,” *Modern Judaism* 33 (2013) 125–47. Salmon relates the hardening

Yet, as we shall see, contemporary rabbinical writings on Christians and Christianity seem to defy these assumptions. Indeed, rabbis and Torah scholars of recent decades are strongly reclaiming the polemical, bringing back all those notions that both the censors and the Jewish authors and editors who lived under Christian hegemony took great care to eliminate. Yet the re-polemization of Judaism is not achieved through a reactionary rejection of modern historiography and its scientific methods. While in other areas contemporary rabbis and Torah scholars may still resist the modern historiographical assessment of Jewish history and literature, whenever the issue of Jewish-Christian relations arises, one cannot but discern an unabashed adoption of a modern scientific attitude to rabbinic literature and to Jewish history. Not unlike professional historians, contemporary Orthodox scholars compare editions to reconstruct the censored texts; they read the texts in their historical contexts, accounting for interactions between Jewish communities and the cultures surrounding them as a formulating factor in the development of their literature, categorizing the sources, dating them, authenticating some and falsifying others. Moreover, this flourishing of critical historical thinking is not limited to a specific ultra-Orthodox group but appears throughout the entire scope of the Haredi scholarly elite, from Ashkenazi to Sephardi rabbinic journals, from Lithuanian to Hasidic new editions of rabbinic literature, from Israeli to European, from religious Zionist to anti-Zionist circles.

Yet these ultra-Orthodox scholars' aims are different from those of historians. To use Raz-Krakotzkin's metaphor again, Orthodox rabbis and Torah scholars adopt the censor's distance and ambivalence to the Jewish past and to rabbinic literature, not in order to obliterate the anti-Christian statements in the Talmud and halakha, but to the contrary—in order to obliterate any tolerance, respect, or approval of

of halakhic attitudes toward Christianity to Orthodoxy's firm antimodernism.

This question corresponds with the controversy on whether Jewish Orthodoxy is modern only in the sense that it is a reaction to the 18th- and 19th-cent. crises engendered by emancipation, enlightenment, and reform in traditional Jewish positions (the term "Orthodoxy" first appears in Jewish literature at the end of the 19th cent.), or if it is modern in its own right. For the classical view, see Yaakov Katz, "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective," *Kivunim* 33 (1987) 89–100 (Hebrew), and his *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York: New York University Press, 1993). See also Moshe Samet, *The New Is Prohibited by Torah: Chapters in the History of Orthodoxy* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2005) (Hebrew); Benjamin Brown, "Orthodox Judaism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism* (ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000) 311–33. For an alternative view, see David Sorozkin, *Orthodoxy and the Regime of Modernity: The Production of Jewish Tradition in Europe in the New Era* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2012) 34–42 (Hebrew). For additional relevant discussions of the "modernity" of Orthodoxy and the need to challenge the classic sociological dichotomies between modernity (in which secularization is defined as a key element) and Orthodoxy (defined as a conservative reaction to modernity), see also Elyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); and Maoz Kahana, *From the Noda Beyehuda to the Chatam Sofer: Halacha and Philosophy in View of the Challenges of the Times* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for the Study of the History of the Jewish People, 2015) (Hebrew).

Christianity, which is construed as a redundant apologetic that was aimed only at appeasing the censor or the political powers under which the censor labored.

■ Purging Halakha of False Tolerance

As Jacob Katz showed in his classic *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, despite the default halakhic definition of Christianity as idolatry, halakhists from the Middle Ages on found more and more reasons to exempt Christians from the accusation of idolatry. This was initially done to enable Jews to engage in commercial relations with Christians, and later on a theological level that categorically changed Christian believers' halakhic and theological status. Whether this development of tolerance was a pragmatic concession to social necessities or a profound theological transformation is debatable, but it is nevertheless evident that rabbinic literature of the modern period abounds in statements that clearly distinguish between the Christians of their time and the pagans of the Bible and the Talmud, exempting Christians from the accusation of idolatry, and granting them relative tolerance.²⁴

However, contemporary halakhists choose almost unanimously, from among the various traditional halakhic approaches to Christianity, the view that holds Christianity to be wholly idolatrous, often based on the halakhic writings of Maimonides.²⁵ How do these rabbinic authorities justify their rejection of the more moderate positions—some of which have enjoyed a wide acceptance in the past? If Christians are and always were idolaters, how does one then contend with the contrary rulings, such as the Tosafists' idea of "association" (*šituf*, which classifies Christianity as an intermediate category between idolatry and pure monotheism)?²⁶

²⁴ Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). See also idem, "The Vicissitude of Three Apologetic Passages," *Zion* 23–24 (1958–59) 174–93 (Hebrew); and Louis Jacobs, "Attitudes toward Christianity in the Halakhah," in *Gevuroth Haromah* (ed. Ze'ev W. Falk; Jerusalem: Mesharim, 1987) xvii–xxx.

²⁵ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry and the Laws of the Gentiles, 9:4; *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Avodah Zarah, 1:3.

²⁶ The definition of Christians as believers of "association" (*šituf*)—that is, a simultaneous belief in both God and another entity—was one of the most important halakhic justifications for conducting commercial relations with Christians during the Middle Ages. The sentence "Noachides are not warned against association" (*in bney Noah muzharim 'al haššituf*) was first introduced into the halakhic discourse by the Tosafists, as part of the permission given to a Jew to receive a Christian's oath in order to prevent monetary loss. The rabbis argued that since faith in "association" does not constitute a transgression of the Seven Noachide Laws for a Christian (and more specifically, it does not constitute idolatry), then a Jew does not violate the halakha by asking the Christian to swear on his faith. See Tosafot on Sanhedrin 63b; Bekhorot 2b; Rabbeinu Yeruham, *sefer toledot 'adam veḥavah* (Tel Aviv: Leon, 1959) 17:5.

Medieval halakhists limited the use of the "association" rule solely to the circumstance of the Christian's oath, but in the modern age, the principle was broadened to additional interactions between Christians and Jews. Later on, the "association" rule was transformed from a series of specific halakhic solutions to specific problems into a fundamental claim about the Christian faith, according to which Christianity is legitimate for gentiles, even though for Jews—who are commanded to follow pure monotheism—it is considered idolatrous. This distinction was not accepted by all halakhists,

How does one approach Menachem Meiri's (1249–1315) unique category for Christians and Muslims as moral “nations who are bound by the manners of religion,”²⁷ or the many prologues to halakhic works, according to which any offensive remarks about gentiles do not refer to contemporary Christians but to the seven Canaanite nations?²⁸

Most contemporary rabbis do not reflect on the halakhic transition that they are performing, other than expressing perplexity over their predecessors' more lenient positions.²⁹ Others, however, reveal an interesting rationale. One argument, reoccurring in many contemporary rabbinical works, is that the more lenient positions of halakhists and Torah scholars of previous generations were affected by forms of religious coercion and do not reflect the true spirit of Judaism.

Rabbi Yosef Pinḥasi, a contemporary Sephardic rabbi and a chief judge at the rabbinic court of the Haredi city Modi'in 'Iit (also known as Qiryat Sepher), writes on this issue in his book *Yefeh to'ar*:

We find that most works published about a century ago had introductions containing words of apology, viz., that the Gentiles mentioned in these works, and the idolatrous practices ascribed to them, [do not refer] to the God-fearing Christians in the authors' countries of residence, and that our Sages (*ḥazal*), in denouncing the Gentiles, were alluding to heathens rather than Christianity. It is a moot question if they wrote these things out of fear and censorship, or if they were speaking the truth and expressing their real views.³⁰

Pinḥasi thus raises the possibility that traditional positive attitudes toward Christianity are inauthentic. As far as Pinḥasi is concerned, modern halakhists who defined Christianity as a legitimate faith for gentiles (based on the Tosafists' “association” rule, which was later developed into the view that Christianity is a deficient monotheistic faith permitted to gentiles and forbidden to Jews) have done so because they were not aware of Maimonides's uncensored ruling (which defines Christianity as full-fledged idolatry):³¹

It is my humble conjecture that the penetrating gaze of the aforementioned modern rabbis [*aḥaronim*] never fell upon Maimonides's uncensored state-

but it did allow for a vast variety of interactions between Jews and Christians and provided a basis for religious tolerance. For a short summary of the development of the halakhic and theological category of “association,” see David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008) 175–77.

²⁷ On Menachem Meiri, see Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 114–28; Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Menachem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 80–108 (Hebrew); Jacobs, “Attitudes toward Christianity.”

²⁸ For a famous example of such an opening statement, see Yehezqel Landau's “apology” (*hitnašlut*), *noda' beyhudah* (Prague: 1776) 3 (Hebrew).

²⁹ See, for example, Yosef, *yabia' omer* (vol. 2) yoreh de'ah 11, 148–49; Eliezer Waldenberg, [Responsa] *šiš eli'ezer* (vol. 13; Jerusalem: E. Waldenberg, 1978) ch. 12, 30 (Hebrew).

³⁰ Yosef Pinḥasi, *yefeh to'ar* (Modi'in 'Iit: Y. Pinḥasi, 2000) 22 (Hebrew).

³¹ The sections in which Maimonides declares Christianity to be idolatry were omitted from his writings by censors. Today, most editions of Maimonides's writings have restored the suppressed texts.

ment to the effect that Christians are idolaters . . . , and that this statement had been suppressed by the censoring authorities in all editions, or had been corrupted by the censors; the source is his Arabic commentary, which had not yet been subjected to censorship. . . . While in our editions it is suppressed and the matter is misunderstood . . . , the plain meaning of his words is that Christians are not only idolaters in comparison with Jews, but that all of the various Christian denominations are in fact idolaters on their own right—as may be readily verified.³²

For Pinḥasi, the reason for the moderate rabbinic treatment of Christianity in the modern age was either the fear of censorship, in which case the authors were fully aware of the distortion and were forced to accept it, or, at a later stage, ignorance; for as the generations passed, the rabbis lost access to the omitted passages or to the texts in their uncorrupted form, so that “the penetrating gaze of the . . . modern rabbis never fell upon Maimonides’s uncensored statement.”

Similar explanations often recur in rabbinic literature.³³ Rabbi David Avitan (a current Jerusalem-based Sephardic halakhist) wrote in the Haredi journal *'or torah* that the lenient Ashkenazi tradition results from unfamiliarity with Maimonides’s original, uncensored text;³⁴ Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch, a prominent Ashkenazi leader in the Haredi world (and head of the rabbinic court *'Edah Haharedit* in Jerusalem), also attributes the distinction made by the halakhists of past generations between pagan idolaters and contemporary Christians to censorship, claiming that an uncensored reading of Maimonides clearly indicates that “there cannot be a more outright form of idolatry than Christianity” and that “no one may be more justly referred to as gods of the gentiles [*'elohey haggoyim*] than him [Jesus].”³⁵ According to Sternbuch, the distinctions between ancient pagans and contemporary Christians were made with an eye to the censor: “Although the works of many halakhists include statements affirming that it is always the ancient pagans to whom the texts refer, and not the nations among which we presently dwell, these statements were written out of fear of censorship; tradition has it that [the Christians’] idolatry is actually the worst and most dangerous.”³⁶

The “fear” argument has been applied with particular vigor to the halakhic views of Menachem Meiri, a medieval halakhist who is unique in his lenient attitude toward Christianity. Rabbinic authors currently debate whether Meiri’s statements were “due to censorship or the author’s own fear of Christian retribution, or he

³² Pinḥasi, *yefeh to'ar*, 27–28.

³³ R' Zvi Yehuda Kook criticized the popular commentary *rambam la'am*: although it did include the uncensored passages about Christianity, the editor, in a footnote, expresses disagreement with Maimonides about the Sanhedrin having killed Jesus, to Kook’s displeasure. See Zvi Yehuda Kook, *yahadut venašrut* (Beit El: Sifriyat kava, 2000) 28–29 (Hebrew).

³⁴ David Avitan, “be'inyan 'ezrah lenošrim beḥinyan haknesyah šelahem,” *'or torah* 357 (1996) 20 (Hebrew).

³⁵ Moshe Sternbuch, *tešuvot vehanhagot* (vol. 3; Jerusalem: 1996) yoreh de'ah, 317.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

actually believed what he wrote.³⁷ With few exceptions,³⁸ the prevailing assumption is that Meiri was forced to adapt himself to circumstances, lest he “receive a blow from the glove of the local landowner [*paris*] . . . and in those days the gloves were not made of leather, but of iron.”³⁹ Only the writings of the rabbis who wrote in Muslim countries reflect the true position of the Jewish tradition on the issue of Christianity, since Ashkenazi rabbis authored their texts while crushed under Christendom’s heel.⁴⁰

This kind of historical reasoning makes use of historicist methods close to those applied in the academic discipline of the historical sciences: the rabbis attack the authenticity of traditional sources by placing them within specific historical contexts, thereby relativizing them. Identifying diverse voices and trajectories within tradition and raising conjectures as to the political and social motivations of various past halakhists and Torah scholars, these contemporary rabbis undermine their predecessors’ authority.⁴¹ Paradoxically, the quest for stable, pure, and authentic truth has actually driven Haredi rabbis to adopt the very methods of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* that ultra-Orthodoxy so deeply reviles. In order to purify Judaism of the pollution caused by contact with the evil kingdom of “Edom” (the typological designation of Christendom), rabbis make use of methods that were originally cultivated in the “enemy’s” flower beds—the historical sciences that originated with Protestant, and later secularized, critique.

■ Purging the Bible of Christian Influence

The Pentateuch according to the Tradition of Chazal (humaš kfi haḥaluqa ‘al-pi masoret ḥazal) was first published in 1990 by R’ Eliezer Posen, a Haredi Torah scholar based in London.⁴² This new edition of the Pentateuch had purported to

³⁷ David ben Zvi Moshe Kahan, *qontras ha‘aqov lemišor: letaḡen ta‘uyot hadefus šel hašaš hoša‘at Vilna* (New York: Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press, 1982) 35.

³⁸ R’ Pinḥas Zeviḥi wrote that Meiri may be relied on, as his writings lay secreted away for centuries and were untouched by censorship. See [Responsa] ‘*ateret paz* (Jerusalem: Tif’eret refa’el ve‘ateret šarah, 2000) 3.1, ḥošen mišpat, 12.

³⁹ From an interview that I conducted with the Haredi-Zionist rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Zeini of the Technion and of Haifa’s ‘*or veyeshu‘ah* yeshiva. Zeini further elaborates on his attitude to Meiri in *ḥesed le‘umim ḥatat: ‘iyun hilḳati vehaguti besugyat qabalat šdaqah migoy uḇerur ‘emdato hameduyeqet šel rabbenu hameiri legabey noḳrim* (Haifa: ‘Or veyeshu‘ah, 2017).

⁴⁰ For the argument that only rabbinic literature that originated in Muslim countries should be regarded as credible concerning Judaism’s position vis-à-vis Christianity, see Yaakov Yerucham Wreschner, *seder ya‘aqob ‘al maseket ‘abodah zarah ve‘inyaneiha* (3rd ed., vol. 2; Jerusalem: Yaakov Yerucham Wreschner, 2009) 645. I will discuss the *seder ya‘aqob* further later on in this article.

⁴¹ On historicist methodology, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and religious Zionism, see Shakhar Pelled, *Shredded Identities* (Haifa: Pardes, 2007) (Hebrew).

⁴² In fact, Posen had been preceded by Eliyahu Koren, founder of *Koren Publishers Jerusalem*, who was the State of Israel’s premier *Tanak* (Bible) publisher. Thus, Koren wrote about his enterprise: “The Koren Tanak is the first Tanak to have been printed in which all of the work, from the design of the Hebrew letters to the finishing touches, was done by Jews and in Jerusalem. This Tanak’s publication . . . led then Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to declare . . . ‘Disgrace has been lifted

cleanse the Torah of Christian chapter divisions, which, according to Posen, were “rooted in idolatry.”⁴³ Posen’s Pentateuch includes a detailed historical introduction on the Christian division of the Pentateuch into chapters, encompassing the Jewish-Christian disputations of the Middle Ages, as well as the history of Hebrew printing up to the late modern period. According to Posen, the Christian chapter divisions penetrated deeply into Jewish tradition because the printing houses were always subject to Christian censorship (often under the administration of Jewish converts to Christianity), and they left their mark on all of the Bibles that were printed. Posen notes that the rabbinic literature remained subject to censorship up until World War I, “and the [Christian chapter-based] division thus remained, Heaven help us, an inseparable part of our Pentateuch, as is written . . . : ‘The foe has laid hands On everything dear to her. She has seen her Sanctuary Invaded by nations Which You have denied admission Into Your community [Lam 1:10; JPS].’”⁴⁴ Thus, the traditional Bible’s division into chapters is perceived as disingenuous and as motivated by evil, “twisted” intentions: “wickedness and heresy with regard to the core beliefs of [our] religion.” The objective of “the evil ones, the accursed gentiles,” was “to weaken our faith in our Creator”;⁴⁵ to cause the Jewish people “to imitate the wicked and ugly acts of the idolaters”; “to undermine and reject the interpretations of our Sages, or to introduce their fallacious method into our holy Torah”; “to stir up among Jews a sense of grievance toward Heaven”; and so on.⁴⁶ The damage perpetrated by the Christian chapter division is portrayed as enormous: “there is no need to describe at length the great suffering (*sa’ar*) of the Shekinah that is experienced each and every day, and the profound injury that is inflicted on the supernal worlds (*‘olamot ha’elyonim*), when students of our holy Torah immerse themselves in books that are permeated and rife with hints of heresy regarding our faith, and in denial of that which is sacred and dear to us.”⁴⁷ Posen seeks to turn the clock back on Bible printing traditions and to institute a “numbering of verses that corresponds to the division that has been passed down to us through the generations(!), in accordance with the tradition of the Sages, per

from Israel.” See Eliyahu Koren, *hara’ayon vehahagšamah hadpasat sefer hatanaḳ—hamahadurah hayehudit harišonah* [*The Idea and Its Realization: The Printing of the Bible—The First Jewish Edition*] (Jerusalem: Koren, 2001) 9. Among the problems that Koren sought to address via the “Jewish” Bible was that of removing it from Christian hands, which had exercised hegemony in this sphere since the invention of printing. In addition to employing Jewish printers and proofreaders, Koren divided the text in accordance with the Hebrew *paršiyot*, or Torah portions, as opposed to the Christian “chapters.” See Eliyahu Koren, “hatanaḳ behoša’at qoren yerushalaym,” in *ki mišion teše’ torah udeḅar hašem miyerušalayim: mah šerau’i lada’at ‘al defušeḳ hatanaḳ* [*For out of Zion Shall the Law Go Forth, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem: What One Must Know about the Bible’s Printed Editions*] (Jerusalem: Koren, 2002).

⁴³ Eliezer Posen, introduction to *ḥumaš kefi haḥaluqa ‘al-pi mašoret ḥazal* (London: Feldheim, 1990) 1.

⁴⁴ Eliezer Posen, introduction to *ḥumaš kefi haḥaluqa ‘al-pi mašoret ḥazal* (London: Posen, 2012) 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

the law communicated by God to Moses in Sinai (*kehalaka leMoše miSinai*).⁴⁸ Although it has long become part of Jewish tradition, the chapter division of the Bible that prevailed for centuries nevertheless strikes Posen as “external” to Judaism and as something to be repudiated.

■ Purging the Talmud of Apologetics

Contemporary Haredi scholars have also begun redacting the Talmud and its commentators, not hesitating to apply scientific methods when seeking to rectify what they perceive as instances of pandering to the Christian powers that be.⁴⁹ The edition of the Talmud that has been subjected to the harshest criticism is actually the Vilna edition (*Dfus Vilna*)—still the most commonly used in the yeshiva world. The Vilna edition of the Talmud is regarded as the “traditional” edition; yet, since tradition is itself suspicious of internalized censorship, more recent reconstructions (based on comparison with older versions, etc.) have, paradoxically, come to be seen as more faithful to tradition than the prevalent texts employed by that tradition. For example, the popular Steinsaltz Talmud, edited by the Chabad Hasidic rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, recovers many censored excerpts that do not appear in the Vilna edition.

It is even more surprising to see that Steinsaltz’s opponents, the Lithuanian-affiliated Haredi publishing house Shabtai Frankel (of whom one would have expected to show even more “traditionalistic” tendencies), also follow similar trajectories. A salient example is how the treatment of a particularly sensitive talmudic passage is altered between the Vilna and the Frankel editions. Bava Qamma 38a is a difficult passage in terms of Jewish-gentile relations, as it exempts a Jew whose ox gores the ox of a gentile (a “Canaanite” in the Vilna edition) from liability, while in the obverse case of a gentile’s ox goring that of a Jew, the gentile is held liable—thus reflecting a clear pro-Jewish bias. The Vilna edition softens this indelicate passage by citing (on the left side of the page at the bottom) the *šitta mequbešet* (by R’ Bezalel Ashkenazi [ca. 1520–ca. 1592], also called the *’asifat zeqenim*) in an excerpt referring to R. Menachem Meiri and to the Tosafist Jonathan ben David haCohen of Lunel (ca. 1135–after 1210), who distinguished between contemporary gentiles and the seven Canaanite nations, thereby shifting the critique away from Christians:

[T]hose [gentiles] who fulfill the Seven [Noachide] Laws should be treated by us as we are treated by them. . . . [N]ow, it is unnecessary to specify that this is also the case concerning the nations who are bound by the manners of religion and courtesy [*’umot hagedurot bedarkei hadatot vehanimusim*]

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ The first to undertake correction of the Talmud and restoration of its suppressed passages was Natan Neta Rabinovich, author of *diqudey sofrim*. A prominent contemporary work in this sphere is Rabbi David Ben Zvi Moshe Kahan’s *qontras ha’aqov lemišor: letaqen ta’uyot hadefus šel hašaš hoša’at vilna* (New York: Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press, 1982).

(Meiri of blessed memory). . . . That is, on seeing that [the ancient nations were] cruel and evil at heart and since they are suspect in all areas in which they are commanded by the Seven Commandments [i.e., the Noachide laws] and, since, as noted, they do not share in their brothers' sorrow, they were [therefore] held liable so as to ensure that they will restrain their oxen, *and this applies solely to the seven [Canaanite] nations*, as it is written: "You must wipe them out completely [Deut 20.16]" (Rabbi Jonathan ben David haCohen of Lunel of blessed memory).⁵⁰

In the Shabtai Frankel edition, however, these conciliatory words were deleted and the editors replaced them with the following passage (on the upper right corner of the page):

In the Vilna edition several passages were printed here and on the previous page under the influence of censorship, and we have removed them (and they even brought Rabbi Jonathan of Lunel's [commentary] while omitting the [opening] words: "this is how we could answer the Christians' response" [*letešubat haminim nuḳal lehašib*]). Furthermore, *all that Meiri wrote on these matters is merely a response to the gentiles*, and as the ḥatam Sofer wrote in 'ateret ḥakamim in response to *baruk ta'am*, 14: "It is imperative that the ruling given in the 'asifat zeqenim in Meiri's name be removed, as it did not issue from his holy pen. . . ." ⁵¹

As seen, the editors of the Shabtai Frankel edition have ruled that Meiri does not reflect Judaism's "authentic" stance, and that his "nations bound by the manners of religion" be expunged from rabbinic literature (while making sure, however, to note the fact of the deletion). Meiri, according to the Shabtai Frankel editors, wrote the passage out of fear of censorship, and Rabbi Jonathan of Lunel similarly differentiated between the Christians and the "seven nations" of the Talmud only as a rhetorical means of placating Christians.⁵² Their redaction of the Talmud leads the Shabtai Frankel editors to question the historical circumstances under which sages issue their rulings, inquire about the audiences they were addressing, and postulate possible ulterior motives for halakhic rulings. All these standard historical-critical methodologies serve the Shabtai Frankel editors in assessing the extent to which the statements at issue are authentic and faithful to the halakhic truth. In most cases, it turns out that the position regarded as more authentic is the one that expresses

⁵⁰ The author refers to Jonathan ben David haCohen of Lunel, *perušey rabbenu yehonatan melunel 'al 21 maseḳtot hašas*, bava qamma (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1969) ch. 4, mishnah 4, 102. Emphasis is mine.

⁵¹ The quote appears in R' Baruch Fränkel-Te'omim, 'ateret ḥakamim ḥošen mišpat 30 responsum 14 (New York: Israel Ze'ev, 1963).

⁵² See also the Haredi rabbi Shmuel Levinson's remarks on the same talmudic passage in *portal hadaf hayomi*, where he reviews the passage's censorship history and the stratagems employed by Torah scholars "in order to shut the mouths of the goyim," as he put it; <http://daf-yomi.com/DYItemDetails.aspx?itemId=4009>. Rabbi Levinson not only believes that Meiri wrote his commentary out of fear of censorship but also that "knowing the mind of his Jewish readers," Meiri assumed they would grasp his real intentions.

greater firmness vis-à-vis the gentiles in general and versus Christians in particular, while the more tolerant positions are viewed as contingent on circumstances and the result of Christian pressure.⁵³

These trends are clearly and forcefully manifested in the book *Seder Yaakov on the Tractate of Idolatry and Its Issues* (*sefer ya'aqob 'al maseket 'abodah zarah ve'inyaneyihah*) by Rabbi Yaaqov Yerucham Wreschner, a Zurich-based Haredi Torah scholar, published in several editions from 1988 to 1995. According to Wreschner, he decided to write about this topic in order to provide a crucial and urgent service to Torah scholars. Wreschner argues that the tractate Avodah Zarah (i.e., idolatry) “is the most severely affected by censorship” of all the tractates of the Talmud.⁵⁴ “Because they discuss gentiles and idolatry in [it], they feared [the censors] and were forced to omit many things.”⁵⁵ Wreschner argues that tractate Avodah Zarah was so heavily censored that the text was distorted beyond recognition. Even now, the vast majority of Torah scholars study censored Talmud editions such as the Vilna edition, which Wreschner regards as the most severely affected by censorship.

Similar to Posen’s biblical approach, Wreschner regards the removal of censorship from rabbinical literature as a “sacred duty.”⁵⁶ In his view, a corrupted talmudic text should disturb us even more than the Torah’s translation into Greek, for in the latter case, the Torah remains untouched by the kind of alien influence perpetrated by the censorship of the Talmud. According to Wreschner, the importance of restoring the suppressed passages and correcting the altered texts is so great that those who have studied tractate Avodah Zarah using the corrupted editions may be considered as never having completed the tractate, and those who have celebrated their completion of the tractate, according to custom, have in fact rejoiced in vain.⁵⁷ Wreschner argues that the “‘censored version’ is not, properly speaking, a version at all, but rather an idol placed in the temple [*selem shehu 'amad*

⁵³ In the face of inauthenticity allegations to which “tolerant” halakhic decisors are subjected, the few rabbis who support interfaith dialogue occasionally express opposing views. For example, in an interview I conducted with R’ David Rosen, the honorary advisor on interreligious affairs to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, he speculated that, had Maimonides known Christians firsthand, he would not have regarded them as idolaters. R’ She’ar Yeshuv Cohen, who served as a representative of the bilateral commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Vatican, conjectured that R’ Zvi Yehuda Kook spoke disparagingly of Christianity in order to defend his father against the defamations to which his positive attitude toward Jesus had exposed him—i.e., he ascribed it to “negative apologetics.”

⁵⁴ Yaaqov Yerucham Wreschner, *sefer ya'aqob 'al maseket 'abodah zarah ve'inyaneiha* (2nd ed., vol. 1; Jerusalem: Yaakov Yerucham Wreschner, 1994) 8. Wreschner also raises the possibility that the tractate was originally called *goyim* [gentiles] and not *'abodah zarah*, though ultimately he rejects the idea.

⁵⁵ Wreschner, *sefer ya'aqob 'al maseket 'abodah zarah ve'inyaneiha* (4th ed., vol. 1; Jerusalem: Yaakov Yerucham Wreschner, 2009) 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 642.

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, 636–39.

baheykal],⁵⁸ which should not be legitimized nor given the benefit of the doubt, but must in fact be removed with all possible speed.”⁵⁹

At this point, Wreschner carefully addresses the implications his endeavor may have for the stability of tradition. He mentions a critique against the recovery of censored texts that appeared in a letter to the editor in the ultra-Orthodox quarterly *sefunot* (of which many of the articles were dedicated to de-censuring rabbinic literature, similar to Wreschner’s project) in 1990/1991, in order to rebut it. Wreschner deals with this critique only in passing, but since this critique is important for my analysis, I will cite a lengthy paragraph from it here. The writer of the letter to the editor, Rabbi Yosef Menachem Zvi Halevi Manen, complains against the nitpicky search for uncensored versions of prayers, since they

confuse the praying man who cannot change his habits, yet thinks, while praying, that his prayer is disrupted. [This issue is especially disturbing] since the great and righteous of the generation have prayed this way from time immemorial. Therefore, one needs to know what the Belzer rebbe [Rabbi Sholom Rokeach, 1781–1855], may his memory protect us, had said, that even a version that was established in the whole of Israel [*kelal Israel*] because of the censor, had become acceptable in Heaven. And he further added, that truly, the beginning of the Haskalah in Poland was rooted in that the maskilim wanted to prove that our entire prayer is disrupted, . . . and in this way [they sought] to destabilize tradition [*mimeile yitrofef haqabbalah*]. . . . And therefore one should be aware that the current version of prayer became an accepted version [in heaven], and our prayer is not disrupted.⁶⁰

This criticism directly targets the subversive character of the de-censuring effort, acknowledging that the deconstruction of tradition in search of the undisrupted origin can go on ad infinitum and endanger the entire orthodox standing. Wreschner responds to this paradigmatic criticism against applying historical-critical methods to sacred tradition by applying historical-critical methods to the Belzer rebbe’s alleged resistance to the de-censuring process:

And it seems that . . . the intention of our teacher and rabbi of blessed memory, [Adm”or z”l, i.e., the Belzer rebbe], was that in the time when the accursed Haskalah had spread, [those who] wished to undercut our prayer, heaven forbid, because of a few errors that were found in it, our teacher and rabbi said that now the custom is such [that] this prayer had also been accepted in heaven, and in this he protected us from [the maskilim’s] ill intentions. But to say that nowadays too, when [God-]fearing wholesome people find tiny disruptions from the censor, [to say] that nowadays it is also forbidden to change [these texts in order to restore them to their pre-censored condition],

⁵⁸ Mishnah Ta’anit 4:1.

⁵⁹ Wreschner, *sefer ya’aqob* (3rd ed.; vol. 2) 639.

⁶⁰ Yosef Menachem Zvi Halevi Manen, “Letter to the Editor,” in *sefunot* 10 (1990–1991) 125–26 (Hebrew).

this our teacher and rabbi did not say. His teaching was one that depends on time, a temporary measure [*hora'ah šhazeman geramah, hora'at ša'ah*].⁶¹

Wreschner dismisses the connection, insinuated in Manen's criticism, between the project of de-censoring traditional texts and the secularizing forces of the Haskalah. In his eyes, the subversive critical methods gain legitimacy when they are employed to "decolonize" Jewish tradition and snatch it back from Christian hands. However—contra the intentions of Wreschner and his colleagues—the de-censoring effort reveals how deep that Christian hand had indeed penetrated into the formation of Judaism, in a way that cannot be uprooted without cutting through the flesh of Jewish tradition.

Through painstaking comparative work, Wreschner reconstructed broad swaths of the *Avodah Zarah* tractate, along with many other traditions regarding idolatry that were touched by censorship.⁶² In the process of attempting to cleanse rabbinic literature of Christian censorship, Wreschner also reawakened a substantial, though hitherto dormant, rabbinic tradition of hostility toward Christianity. In his book, he quotes the talmudic sources on Christianity and the popular tradition that is rooted in these sources—surveying the entire spectrum from *nittel naḳt* (Christmas Eve) customs to versions of the anti-Christian text *toledot Yešu*;⁶³ he reconstructs the arguments of the medieval Jewish polemicists, from criticism of the New Testament (which he claims he never read, due to the "Torah prohibition"),⁶⁴ to the long list of derogatory appellations for Christian beliefs that appears in Rabbi Yom-

⁶¹ Wreschner, *seder ya'aqob* (3rd ed., vol. 2) 637.

⁶² Wreschner follows in the footsteps of Rabbi Rafael Natan Neta Rabinovich, compiler of the *diquduqey sofrim* series, which compares different versions of rabbinic writings. He also quotes at length from *diquduqey sofrim*, referring to Rabbi Rabinovich's study of the history of censorship. Wreschner seeks to fill the gaps in Rabbi Rabinovich's reconstructive effort; see *seder ya'aqob*, (3rd ed., vol. 2) 639–43. In his historical overview, Wreschner proposes rules for determining a text's degree of rabbinic authenticity in terms of the time and place where it was written. As I have noted above, a lengthy subsection is devoted to the argument that Meiri wrote what he did due to censorship concerns, and that his opinion must therefore not be relied on (*ibid.*, 639–40). Wreschner stresses that Meiri lived after the burning of the Talmud (Paris, 1244) and wrote during a very difficult period in terms of Christian pressure at a location where such pressure was often brought to bear. Thus, Meiri's statement about Christianity should be regarded not as a reflection of his real opinion, but as a concession to censorship.

⁶³ Wreschner proposes distinguishing the historically reliable portions of *toledot Yešu* according to their provenance. He claims that the Jewish version of the Jesus story is more reliable than the gentile versions because "he was of our people, we know the truth, and it is stated in the Gemarah that there was such a person, and that he practiced sorcery and mocked the words of the sages, and in the history of his life it is stated that he worked wonders, but through sorcery and not by the power of sanctity, and that he was of King David's line"; *ibid.*, 394. For a revealing overview of *nittel naḳt* customs, see Marc Shapiro, "Torah Study on Christmas Eve," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999) 319–53. On the complex history of the *toledot Yešu*, see "*Toledot Yeshu*" ("*The Life Story of Jesus*") *Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch; TSAJ 143; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

⁶⁴ In contrast, Wreschner refers directly to the Qur'an on several occasions; see, for example, *seder ya'aqob* (3rd ed., vol. 2) 388.

Tov Muhlhausen's anti-Christian polemic *sefer nišahon*;⁶⁵ he quotes midrashim, letters, and liturgical passages that predict Christianity's ultimate downfall in the messianic future; he reconstructs popular tales (such as that of Jesus's oppressed spirit appearing smeared with excrement,⁶⁶ or that of a disciple of Rabbeinu Tam to whom an eternal stench adhered because he had laughed at Jesus's punishment when Rabbeinu Tam brought him down from heaven).⁶⁷ Wreschner reconstructs numerous etymologies that mock the names of Jesus and the Christian saints. For example, he reads the Hebrew letters nun-tsadi-resh, which form the root of the word *našrut* (Christianity), as an acronym for *nidon be-šo 'ah rotaḥat* (condemned in boiling excrement). He constructs the letters of *nošri* (Christian) as *nošar* (i.e., produced), as refutation of the doctrine of virgin birth by indicating production from the coupling of a man and a woman, "like all other people in the world." He reads *Yešu* (the Hebrew letters yod-shin-vav, spelling the name Jesus) as an acronym of *yemah šemo ve-zikro* (may his name and memory be obliterated). He calculates that the numerological (gematria) value of *Yešu* is equivalent to that of the word *'arum* (cunning and deceitful) *kenaḥaš* (as a snake), thereby alluding to the Fall: "for the intention of both the serpent and *Yešu* was the world's destruction." He emphasizes that *Yešu* is a truncation of the word *yešu 'a* (salvation) and indicates that "he did not bring salvation even to himself." He points out that the letters of Jesus's name—yod-shin-vav-‘ayin—are also in the letters of the name *'Esav* (Esau), "for he was Esau reincarnated." He derives the name *Mariya* (Mary) from the same Hebrew root as *marah* (bitter), quoting Naomi's lament in Ruth 1:20: ". . . for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter" (JPS). He proposes that *šetiv va'ereḥ* (warp and woof)—the traditional Jewish term for the cross—hints that, by gaining many converts, Jesus had in fact "cleansed" the Jewish people of the blight of the *'ereḥ rab*, a heathen mob purported to have intermingled with the Jews due to the many who had falsely converted (out of fear rather than faith) during the time of Mordechai and Esther; and so on.⁶⁸ Wreschner also stresses the halakhic importance of mocking Christianity in accordance with the commandment to "destroy their names,"⁶⁹ and he prays for the speedy eradication of the Christian "abomination" from the holy city of Jerusalem.⁷⁰

Wreschner is aware of his project's potential for problematic—even dangerous—repercussions. Nevertheless, he feels that the time is ripe for such an endeavor:

⁶⁵ Ibid., 478. Wreschner even added to the list a few terms that he felt were missing, such as *kalonah* (her disgrace)—*kevodah* (her dignity), and *kenessiyah* (church)—*ṭum'ah* (impurity), etc.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 399; reference to Rabbi Chayim Vital, *sefer haḥezyonot*. The story echoes the talmudic statement that Jesus is condemned to be cast into boiling excrement in hell (Gittin 57a).

⁶⁷ Ibid.; reference to *me'ir 'eyney israel* (vol. 4) 378 (on the Chofets Chaim).

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 399–401, 407.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 619: "'and destroy their names' is interpreted by Rashi as an injunction to 'call them by derogatory names.'"

⁷⁰ Wreschner aspires for the evaporation of Islam from Jerusalem as well, but this is based on a different theological attitude. His discussion of Islam is beyond the scope of this article.

And this being the case, now that the Christian faith is experiencing a decline, and as 'or *hahayim haqadoš* wrote in regard to the verse: “For their Rock is not like our Rock [Deut 32:31]: ‘. . . the might of Israel is not as the might of the nations, for idolatry is not long-lasting, as it is written: ‘Truthful speech abides forever, a lying tongue for but a moment [Prov 12:19]’”⁷¹ We may therefore hope that that which has begun to fall will not recover but will surely and completely fall, and [given that] some of them [the Christians] are already writing against their own faith, one may therefore correct the [Jewish] books in a modest and wise fashion, and [in a way that is] sufficient for those who understand, for there are yet many who tread [Christianity’s] erroneous path, and their faith might still, Heaven forbid, gain in strength. . . .”⁷²

Wreschner is referring here to a gradual weakening of the Christian religion—thanks to which one may now cautiously loosen the reins and restore those censored portions of rabbinic literature: the passages expressing Judaism’s aversion to the gentile world and to idolatry, especially Christian idolatry.⁷³ He himself is clearly unsure just how far one may go, and to what degree one should still be wary of the penetrating gentile gaze: “We must not deceive ourselves that there is a dearth of Jew-haters, either in the land of Israel or abroad, who wish to blacken our name.” On the contrary, “Jew-hatred is growing from day to day, . . . since Mount Sinai from which hatred [of Jews] has descended to the nations, and it is a halakhic axiom that Esau hates Jacob, today as always. . . .”⁷⁴

How, then, does Wreschner suggest removing the stain of censorship from rabbinic literature without awakening the wrath of the nations? “For this,” says Wreschner, “one needs a pretext, and the matter must be carefully studied to ensure that one does not, Heaven forbid, create an obstacle, or endanger even a single Jewish person.”⁷⁵ Wreschner proposes several stratagems for addressing the problem. First, publish one’s writings in Rashi script so as to deter readers who do not belong to the yeshiva world. Second, cover one’s tracks. For example, rather than expressing himself unequivocally in halakhic matters, Wreschner employs allusive language: “but with regard to the laws currently in effect regarding present-day ‘idolaters,’ although I wrote about it in a readily understandable manner, I was nevertheless careful to do so allusively, and usually also employed the acronym for idolaters ‘*akum* [‘*ovdei koḳavim umazalot*], for who knows who might get hold of the book, and there is no need to elaborate.”⁷⁶ Third, publish a traditional apologetic prologue on the first page of the book,⁷⁷ affirming that all references to

⁷¹ Wreschner, *seder ya‘aqoḇ* (3rd ed., vol. 2) 619; reference to 'or *hahayim* commentary on Deuteronomy.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 642.

⁷³ Wreschner, of course, considers Christianity to be idolatry; see *ibid.*, 474.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 643.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 638.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 634.

⁷⁷ According to Wreschner, although it is no longer customary to print such apologetic statements, he chose to include one, because his book “specifically addresses matters of idolatry and censorship”—

'akum refer solely to the ancient nations “who were untouched by the light of faith in the Creator and his unity,” and not to “the nations among whom we live and are bound by the manners of religion.”⁷⁸

Such a notice indeed introduces the first edition of Wreschner’s work. But Wreschner omitted it from subsequent editions. The distinction between the ancient nations and contemporary gentiles, he maintained, misled the public and, in effect, undermined the project’s purpose. “If, Heaven forbid, it should be necessary,” that is, if the book should fall into the wrong hands, one might show the gentile readers the first edition, and “that is the correct way [to handle the matter], to [have] an explanation prepared in advance.”⁷⁹ Wreschner’s policy is, in fact, a strange one: admitting that he is covering his tracks—on the assumption, perhaps, that the later editions would not reach the hands of knowledgeable gentiles.

This internal dialogue within the *seder ya'akov* is a clear example of the dynamic of the rabbinic stand on Christianity in recent decades: The ultra-Orthodox author wants to be loyal to age-old Jewish tradition, yet the kind of fidelity to tradition that he proposes is in itself a subversion of a longstanding tradition. Wreschner makes an effort to expunge all expressions of tolerance toward Christianity—starting with the apologetic statement at the beginning of the book, continuing with the moderate laws that he invalidates as reflections of Jewish fear of the surrounding Christian world and ending with passages altered by censorship hundreds of years ago that have since become an integral part of the rabbinic canon. Throughout the work, he apologizes repeatedly for invalidating the apologetic approach to Christianity. Has the time come to leave fear of Christianity behind and to give expression to Judaism’s hard-line stance? Wreschner has trouble deciding. On the one hand, “the Christian faith is experiencing a decline.” On the other hand, “it is a halakhic axiom that Esau hates Jacob, today as always.” Ultimately, Wreschner feels that the time is ripe for Judaism to express its animosity toward Christianity—an animosity that he considers part and parcel of an authentic Jewish identity. This choice constitutes an abandonment of the relatively moderate attitudes toward Christianity that prevailed for over three centuries and a gradual return to earlier traditions that held sway from antiquity to the Middle Ages—traditions that reflect a deep hostility toward the Christian faith.

■ Tradition and the Quest for Authenticity

In their treatment of the history of Jewish-Christian relations in rabbinic literature, contemporary Torah scholars use the Christian censor’s heritage against itself. With the very same careful attention applied by Christian censors to rabbinic literature, in their effort to purge the literature of any trace of anti-Christian sentiment,

that is, it contains material of particular sensitivity; see *ibid.*, 641.

⁷⁸ Wreschner, *seder ya'akov 'al maseket 'ahodah zarah ve'inyaneiha* (1st ed.; vol. 1; Jerusalem: Yaakov Yerucham Wreschner, 1988).

⁷⁹ Wreschner, *seder ya'akov* (3rd ed.; vol. 2) 638.

today's rabbis are invested not only in the hairsplitting project of reintroducing these censored texts but also in amending—if not obliterating—parts of the literary tradition that seem to coincide too closely with the censor's claims, that is, that refrain from expressing negative views on Christianity.

This destabilization of established, accepted tradition is done out of a positivistic, even romantic assumption that an authentic position, an “original” stance, of Jewish tradition vis-à-vis Christianity actually exists. The modern critical approach to history thus functions here precisely in the service of a fundamentalist return to the “pure” source, in a way that should complicate our perception of Haredi scholarship. In other words, the fundamentalist attempt to recover the purity of tradition and to return to its immaculate source seems to be in harmony with the allegedly antitraditionalistic method of modern critical thinking, and not against it.⁸⁰ The appearance of such historiographical reasoning among the Haredi elite is even more surprising, as scholars usually identify the penetration of modern currents and discourses into the ultra-Orthodox world through the more popular layers of society, while the elite is charged with protecting the pure core of tradition—that is, it is assumed to be the model for an uncompromised fundamentalist behavior.⁸¹ In the encompassing critical project discussed here, one can discern a process of deep modernization, not only in terms of utilizing modern technologies while maintaining a traditionalistic worldview, but in terms of integrating one of the core components of the modern *Weltanschauung*—the critical approach to tradition and to history—into the beating heart of Haredi Judaism: the circle of rabbinic scholars (*talmidey haḥakamim*). This elite co-opts the very power of critical historiography to undermine prevalent beliefs, in order to pave the way to a more fundamentalist position, which is further bolstered by a patina of historiographical “truth.”

Ultra-Orthodox scholars seem to assume that the “original” position of the Jewish tradition vis-à-vis Christianity can be traced if one neutralizes power considerations in the Jewish-Christian relationship, inspecting only the isolated theological aspects of the issue through a controlled experiment. Paradoxically, it is precisely the political conditions of a sovereign Jewish state, on the one hand, and of Jewish existence within secular, liberal states, on the other, that are supposed to produce this politics-free (and, to some extent, Christians-free) environment, in which Jews are liberated to excavate the *original* attitude of their tradition to Christianity. Needless

⁸⁰ On the function of fundamentalist elites as the guardians of scriptural traditions against the penetration of modern currents, see Nurit Stadler, *A Well-Worn Tallis For a New Ceremony: Trends in Israeli Haredi Culture* (Jewish Identities in Post-Modern Society; Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2012) 21–22.

⁸¹ On the utilization of modern technologies within Haredi society without affirming modern ideologies, see Kimi Caplan, *besod haśiḥah haḥaredi* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2007) 52–58. Stadler, *A Well-Worn Tallis*, 125, describes the penetration of modern discourses on a deeper level into Haredi society (such as the therapeutic discourse). Yet for Stadler, too, such modern discourses are legitimized in order to bolster the ability of the Torah scholars to dedicate themselves to Torah study, which in itself still takes place in a “fundamentalist” way, i.e., a reactionary mode that co-opts modernity in order to counter modern critical and secular reasoning; *ibid.*, 126–29.

to say, the Jewish-Christian relationship was both political and theological from the outset, in its better moments as in its worse. The attempt to return to a source in which these elements are purified from each other is, as Daniel Boyarin recently reminded us, already saturated with anachronistic Protestant assumptions.⁸²

It is worth noting that this set of assumptions is not at all far from that of Catholic pro-rapprochement theologians who seek to restore an original Judeo-Christian fraternity from beneath generations of power struggle. Similar to the rabbis and Orthodox authors at the center of this article who seek to restore the authentic Jewish attitude to Christianity, Catholic theologians and historians are suspicious of postbiblical Christian traditions for having digressed from, to quote *Nostra Aetate* #4, “the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ”—that is, from the authentic brotherly love of the first Christians to their Jewish kinsmen. Catholics and Torah scholars alike identify the long history of Jewish life under Christendom as one that had dire consequences for the development of their traditions, consequences that are fundamentally at odds with these traditions’ true “spirit.” Therefore, both communities regard these “consequences” not as part of tradition but as digression from it, striving to undermine their authority by making use of critical tools. While the ultra-Orthodox philological project of de-censoring the sources is one that leans heavily on the current circumstances of Jewish power, the Catholic project has much to do with the consciousness of secularization, and with the Church’s loss of power in the Western world. The difference between *aggiornamento* Catholics and de-censoring rabbis is not one of historical reasoning, nor one of method, but one of ideology: whereas Catholics are attempting to restore a lost paradise of Judeo-Christian brotherly symbiosis, the Orthodox Jewish nostalgia is for the Jewish people’s dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations. Both these “traditionalist” societies have been going through a very similar process of modernization of their approach to their traditions.

Yet the application of modern-historical methods to rabbinic tradition in order to purge it of Christian influence (or to Christian tradition to purge it of anti-Judaism) is in itself heavily influenced by Christianity. Modern exegesis has its origins in the Protestant tradition, which formed its separation from Catholic tradition precisely by purging Scripture of the polluting mediation of Rome’s teaching. The rabbinical quest for an unmediated access to tradition, beneath the compromised layers of power relations and history, is bound to be part of the Judeo-Christian drama. Both Jewish history, and the options available for Jews to reinvent this history, are thus Judeo-Christian beyond revocation, so that even the struggle against the Judeo-Christian symbiosis is saturated with Judeo-Christian symbiosis.

However, this historiographical problem of deconstructing tradition and cultural memory, while seeking the lost immaculate source, is one that all modern scholars struggle with and does not pertain uniquely to Orthodox Jews (and Catholic

⁸² Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019) 131–32.

Christians) who are going through a process of modernization. The impossibility of stripping the simple, original units of tradition from the history of their reception is one that both historians and theologians carry with them from the first early modern attempts to reconstruct the original versions of the Hebrew Bible to Albert Schweitzer's famous twentieth-century dictum on the quest for the historical Jesus, as one in which the scholar always ends up staring into the mirror. The one impassable source that all these quests seem to end up retrieving is the Reformation's deep suspicion of postbiblical (both Catholic and Jewish) traditions as contingent distortions that must be superseded.