

Hertz, Reason and Religious Education

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Biography: Nick Zangwill is Professor of Philosophy at Durham University, UK. He is the author of *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Cornell, 2001), *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford, 2007), and is co-editor of *Scruton's Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). His forthcoming book is on the philosophy of music. He has published more than ninety papers on a variety of philosophical subjects.

Abstract: This essay argues that former Chief Rabbi Dr. Joseph Hertz of the United Kingdom was correct to offer reasons in his *Humash* for Jewish beliefs and practices from the point of view of someone who did not already accept them. His approach is opposed to the ‘immersion’ strategy, which only exposes Jews to Jewish sources and traditions. Hertz understood that in the marketplace of ideas of contemporary culture, the immersion strategy offers only fragile security when modern Jews have religious alternatives.



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One common approach to Jewish education in many strands of contemporary Judaism is what we might call the *immersion* strategy. The idea is that in order to get Jews to embrace Judaism and increase their observance of *mitsvot*, Jews should be immersed in the wisdom of the Sages and be exposed to Jewish ways of life. The assumption behind this—perhaps more tacit than explicit—is that when Jews have familiarity with Jewish views and traditions, they will gravitate towards Judaism by a kind of osmosis. The strategy is to provide a kind of intellectual *mikvah*; deep immersion is supposed to lead to the opening of a Jew's eyes. Often this immersion strategy involves exposing the person to expressions of awe towards the great scholarship and wisdom of various sages, and we hope that this awe is transmitted to the aspiring Jew. According to the *mikvah*/immersion approach, all Jews need do is *deepen* their knowledge of Judaism, and other things being equal, this will lead them to follow the ways of Jewish tradition.

I believe this approach to be a mistake, one with roots in a misunderstanding of the pluralism of the modern world—and probably that of other cultures and eras too. It may also get something wrong about Judaism itself. It is not that knowledge of Judaism and its traditions is not important, but the immersion approach omits the project of engaging in *reasons* and *arguments* for the whole system from a perspective outside the system.

A different approach than the immersion strategy is to give more of a sales-pitch in a busy and noisy market-place of ideas. This was the approach of the pre-war British Chief Rabbi Dr. Joseph Hertz's *Humash* (*Pentateuch and Haftorot*). Hertz got it right, because in the market-place of ideas, one cannot rely on a monopoly of

supply, nor should Jewish religious educators desire to have such a monopoly. In today's world there is a choice: one can be a Buddhist Jew, a Christian Jew, a Moslem Jew, a Bahai Jew, an atheist Jew, a Marxist Jew or a New Age Jew. (The last is particularly popular). Even when one opts to be Jewish Jew, he has a choice among Reform, liberal, Conservative, Masorti and various Orthodox brands of Judaism. There is a lot on the shelf! The fact that my parents and their ancestors used Persil washing powder does not mean that I should use Persil washing powder now. That is a different question. Brand loyalty cannot be relied upon.

Tradition makes for nice songs and comforting food; but without reasons tradition is fragile security for the future.

We need to hear *reasons* in the contemporary world. By reasons, I mean non-circular reasons, ones that do not appeal from one Jewish authority to another. Tradition makes for nice songs and comforting (if somewhat unhealthy) food; but, without reasons, tradition is fragile security for the future. To his credit, Hertz tried to give us reasons in his *Humash*. He is sometimes criticized for offering 'apologetics' for Judaism. But Hertz provides a more solid foundation for future practice than a strategy of deference and rote. The immersion approach is the more insecure one, for when one comes up for air, who knows what one will breathe, or what will one choose to breathe?

Hertz's *Humash* contrasts with much of the *Artscroll* series. There are many good aspects of the *Artscroll* series, in particular the typeface, layout and translation. Yet the commentary is very different from Hertz's *Humash*. The

Artsroll series pursues the immersion approach as opposed to the reasons approach. It assumes that the reader is on board with the general project of Judaism—and Judaism of a particular genre. Indeed, it assumes that it is obvious that one should be on board. Thus, a reader finds few non-circular reasons, and apparent difficulties are rarely confronted. But this does not work when there is a plurality of choices in a market-place of ideas. This is why I believe that Hertz's approach is superior.

When one comes up for air, who knows what one will breathe, or what will one choose to breathe?

One reason that Islam is a fast growing religion today is precisely because reasons are offered by Muslim religious educators and authorities, and they are reasons that do not appeal only to their own religious system. My point is not that they are good reasons, but they *are* reasons. Moreover, they are reasons that most Muslim teenagers (not sophisticated intellectuals) have at their disposal and can and will produce them when challenged. Other faiths should envy and emulate this. For example, try telling a young Muslim woman who covers her hair that Islam is sexist; you will be assailed by arguments to the effect that it is the very opposite. This is impressive. Reasons and logical arguments are what are needed in the market-place of ideas. Saying that one must simply penetrate further into the Jewish religious texts, study more and more and revere—that is defer to—the wisdom of Sages does not work as an approach for Jews who have alternatives.

There are consequences of this. Instead of trying to ban people who proselytize to Jews, Jewish religious educators and authorities should supply effective counter-arguments against Christian claims and those of other faiths or ways of life. (“Jews for Jesus” is the

most notable organization that does this.) The attempt to ban such activities in Israel or elsewhere exhibits a patronizing attitude to ordinary Jews, who can make up their own minds *and* or who should be empowered to do so. Also Buddhism of a Westernized variety kind is immensely popular among Jews—and constitutes a far greater threat than Christianity. But the Jewish case against it, or against those elements of Buddhism that conflict with Judaism, is rarely heard. Presumably educators and authorities could supply such reasons. Yet I have the impression that they don't think it is a priority. This is to be expected, given the standard assumption that Jewish education is about immersion, not reasons and arguments.

The assumption seems to be that it is only a matter of competing for *airtime*, as it were, and that if Christians, Buddhists or others have more time for their commercials than the airtime allotted for Jewish ‘education’, then the Jew's loyalty will inevitably fall prey to conversion. On the other hand, if there is a Jewish monopoly of the doctrines to which Jews are exposed (like state-controlled television in a totalitarian regime), then Judaism will win their hearts.

Is not the average Jew less docile than this picture suggests? They can and should decide for themselves on the case that is put to them, and on the basis of their own reflections and observations. If so, there should be those who offer non-question-begging reasons and arguments.

“Are there any neutral reasons?” you might ask, philosophically. Are not reasons only reasons given assumptions, which are likely to be the doctrines of one outlook or another? While there is some truth to this objection, it is an exaggeration to suppose that there is no reflective standpoint from which we can ask what we have reason to believe. Embracing, abandoning, reaffirming an old or converting to a new way of life are often conscious decisions.

Of course we are sometimes passive and allow ourselves to conform to a set of norms from habit or rote, or to lapse through inattention. But when we choose a way of life, that choice is not a real choice unless we have reasons for choosing. People who consciously chose to embrace, abandon, convert to, or reaffirm, a way of life have their reasons. Like choosing a spouse or career, choosing a religion is done for reasons, even though it may become passive or a matter of habit thereafter. Without reasons we cannot choose; we can only be passively religious. But passively religious people are easy prey for those who have an arsenal of arguments. With what can they defend their way of life?

Jewish educators should not strive for monopoly control on the supply of religious ideas

I have been emphasizing the existence of a market-place of ideas, and that educators and authorities should not strive or wish for monopoly control on the supply of religious ideas. Given that there are alternatives, it is unlikely that mere deep immersion in the tradition will be effective. This strategy is a mistake today—and, I suspect, it always was. What is needed is a sales pitch. Jews, quite reasonably, want a good bargain! In this respect,

ideas are not fundamentally different from washing power.

Rabbinic tradition contains a *midrash* that tells the story of God offering the Torah to the Jewish people, who took it as a good deal. The question in the contemporary world is: even if the Torah was a good deal at Sinai, is it still a good deal today? According to the *midrash*, God “hawked” the Torah around to several nations to see which would accept it. But it was difficult to sell, and only the Jews bought it.

What is omitted from this story is what the competing products were. It is surely wrong to think that the choice was just a question of accepting or rejecting the Torah. The question is whether to accept the Torah rather than other intellectual products that are available. The Torah, many Jews thought at Sinai, washed whiter than rivals brands. Were they right then? And does it still wash whiter today? Since that time, many new intellectual products have come on the market. We need good reasons to continue to buy Jewish or to buy some particular brand of Judaism. Either individual Jews come up with them for themselves or they are given good ones from rabbis, religious educators or Jewish leaders. Lacking reasons, Jews will certainly shop around. This is why regarding effective Jewish education, Hertz’s approach was the right one.