

Questions raised by Quora readers, related to Judaism's relationship to other religions, each followed by my response:

Are the 10 commandments different in Judaism from Christianity?

Although the texts are the same - although of course in Judaism they are in Hebrew - they are counted differently. The Hebrew word "devarim" is translated as "commandment" in Christian bibles even though the Hebrew word means "statement".

Once you make this incorrect translation, the sentence whose initial words are "I am Adonai your God" can't count as a commandment, although in Judaism it is counted as one of the 10 statements. Acknowledging that Adonai is our God who liberated us from slavery in Egypt is an essential statement and faith commitment of Judaism.

To compensate for not counting this statement, Christianity counts the last "do not covet" statement as two separate commandments, since those words appear twice. Judaism considers that as one statement with two parts.

What is Orthodox Judaism's view on Zoroastrianism and the claim that Judaism's beliefs were influenced by it?

Core to Zoroastrianism is the belief that there are two powerful forces in the world, a force for good and a force for evil.

This is a very attractive and very natural belief on an individual level, because it provides an easy answer for why bad things happen to us, and on a theological level, because it disposes of questions like how a good God can allow bad things to happen.

Judaism, however, insists that there is one God, and that one God is responsible for all that happens, that there are no separate evil forces in the universe that is ruled by the one God. The motto of Judaism is that God is One.

For many centuries 2000 years ago, Judaism's principal adversary was Zoroastrianism. Even in the time of the Talmud, the battle continued; it is noted that if the service leader says "modim anachnu lach" twice, he has to be removed immediately because by saying it twice, he is acknowledging the presence of two powers in the universe.

Many of the ancient sages believed in the existence of evil spirits. For example, scholars were advised not to walk alone at night, lest they be trapped by evil spirits. Even numbers were considered by some sages as controlled by evil spirits, so they would have an attendant count the number of glasses of wine they drank to make sure that the number was odd. If by chance they drank an even number of cups, then they would in effect be inviting the intervention of evil spirits; if that happened, they could counter the evil spirits with specific hand motions and incantations. How could they have believed in evil spirits in a world that was ruled by one God?

It is, on the one hand, strange that the tradition did not forbid or even look down on these beliefs and practices because they clearly reflect Zoroastrian beliefs and clearly deny the Oneness of God. On the other hand, the Talmud is a free-wheeling document where many different voices are allowed to be heard.

But the consequence of this lax attitude to belief in evil spirits was that traditional Judaism absorbed, and even embraced, this basic notion of Zoroastrianism, even though it contradicted the basic principles of Judaism.

For example, many rabbis created amulets that would ward off evil spirits and, to this day, women place red ribbons in baby carriages to counter the devil in which we don't believe!

The Bible tells us to place a mezuzah on our doorposts to remind us continuously of God's presence. Although it has many opportunities to do so, the Bible does not draw an analogy between the mezuzah and the blood on the doorposts that protected our ancestors during the tenth plague. Yet today inscribed on most mezuzahs is the name of God, "Shaddai - lord of hosts," because its Hebrew letters form an acronym for the Hebrew words that mean "guardian of the doors of Israel." Guardian against what? Evil spirits. Thus this important commandment has been hijacked by Zoroastrianism.

The recent publication of an Orthodox translation and commentary on the Talmud raises the question of whether evil spirits exist. They first present very clearly the views of the great 12th century rabbi and scholar Maimonides that evil spirits do not exist. Then they present very clearly the views of the 13th century rabbi and scholar Nachmanides who argued that evil spirits do exist. They then note that since most of the medieval commentators agreed with Nachmanides, they have to accept their conclusion and agree that evil spirits do exist.

I was very struck by this reasoning. Instead of thinking through the issue themselves, these modern commentators decided to follow the majority of the medieval commentators and maintain a point of view that is clearly heretical. No one has the courage to say that Judaism has been corrupted by Zoroastrianism.

So, in response to the question I surmise that any Orthodox Jew would totally reject Zoroastrianism, but would likely be unaware of the ways in which Jewish practice (including examples not mentioned here) have been corrupted by the continued influence of Zoroastrianism.

Is there any historical support for the biblical story of Jesus driving the money changers from the Temple?

The author of the story clearly misunderstood the role of the money changers in the Temple.

Each Jew making a pilgrimage to the Temple had to bring an animal as an offering. Those coming from a distance were instead allowed to purchase an animal locally. However, they brought with them currency from home, which would not be accepted by the local animal dealers. It would be like trying to purchase clothes in America with Russian rubles. The money changers thus performed an essential service, enabling pilgrims to convert their currency into local currency so that they could purchase animals to bring to the Temple as their offerings.

As an observant Jew, Jesus would not have seen the money changers as bad people who he would have wanted to drive out of the Temple. He would have known that they played a valuable role.

The author of the story evidently knew that there were money changers in the Temple, but had no idea that they performed an important role, and somehow decided that they represented corruption and profiteering in the Temple, and therefore decided that Jesus would have opposed their presence in the Temple. They therefore created the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the Temple. Since the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, they would have had no way of fact-checking their story.

The story is, in any case, unbelievable. What would happen to you if you walked into a bank and insisted that all the tellers leave? Would they actually leave? The more likely result is that you would be arrested.

Sadly, their story created or contributed to the myth that Jews were all essentially corrupt, a myth that persists to this day. This story is an important factor in the anti-Semitism that pervaded Christianity since its early days.

Why are Muslims relatively more religious than people of another religion?

I wonder whether it is actually true that Muslims are more religious than people of other religions or whether the social and religious pressure to conform forces many Muslims to be fearful — fearful that saying anything or doing anything or challenging the tradition in any way that is not in conformity with the rules will have very severe consequences.

Perhaps some Muslims can respond to this question anonymously, since I think that very few active Muslims would affirm my suspicions with their names.

The same is true of ultra-Orthodox Jews. Those who speak out are in effect expelled from the community. For Muslims the consequences may be even more severe, particularly in Muslim-dominated countries.

How difficult is it for someone who grew up speaking a Chasidish Yiddish to understand Litvish-accented Yiddish?

ich veis nit

Is there a high chance that orthodox Jews would do something to me if I (a non-Jewish Arab) kissed an Orthodox Jewess in front of the synagogue during shabbat?

The answer to your question of course depends on where you are, who else is around, whether she consented to your kiss, etc.

As another responder wrote, if you do this in an Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem to a random Orthodox woman, you would be lucky to escape with your life. That would probably also be true in a Muslim neighborhood if the woman was Muslim and not your wife, and maybe also if she was.

If you do this in New York, you will probably be arrested for sexual assault and spend a long time dancing with the legal system. On the other hand, if the woman consented, then probably both of you will be ostracized by your respective communities.

If this is something that you are planning to do, think carefully about it. It sounds like a lose-lose situation, unless the two of you are planning to start a new life ... in which case, you probably should find a less in-your-face way of announcing it.

Is there only one heaven and hell or one for every religion?

In the old days, each religion had its own heaven and its own hell, but as the population increased, it became increasingly inefficient to have separate facilities, so all the religions pooled their resources and combined their heavens and their hells. Despite initial concerns, the mergers worked very well. Those in hell were so absorbed with dealing with their own punishments that they didn't even notice that their neighbors belonged to different religions. Those in heaven had practiced tolerance all their lives on earth, and had no problem spending eternity with people who were different from them. Indeed a main feature of heaven was all people got along very well.

Can Christians study the Torah with a Jewish teacher without the intention of converting?

You need to understand that for many centuries, if a Jew taught Torah to a non-Jew, and this became known, then both could suffer severe consequences, including death ... in both Christian and Muslim countries. So there is a historical reluctance to teach Torah to non-Jews, particularly in Orthodoxy. However, if you want to learn Torah, you should seek a rabbi (or other learned Jew) who would be willing to teach you. Many synagogues have courses in basic Judaism and also courses intended for converts. If you speak to the rabbi and ask whether you can attend, he or she may permit you to attend if you have good reasons for doing so.

Are atheists aware that they are affirming that God doesn't exist without proof?

It seems that Quora atheists are unaware that there is no more evidence for their claim that God does not exist than there is for the claim that God does exist.

Indeed, no real "proof" has been presented by either side after thousands of years of attempts. Both sides believe their own "proofs" and refuse to recognize that the lack of acceptance of their "proofs" by the other side negates the assertion that their "proofs" are really proofs.

In mathematics, if you can't convince the community of mathematicians that your "proof" is correct, then you don't have a proof.

Atheism is a belief system in the same way that any religion is a belief system. It is based on the belief that there is no god. Like the adherents of any belief system, its members expend a lot of words and a lot of energy proselytizing for their system, without recognizing that they are acting much like the adherents of other belief systems.

All that we know is that we really don't know with any degree of logical certainty either that God exists or that God doesn't exist. In other words, from a logical perspective, we should all be agnostics.

But life is not just about we can prove. We can be agnostic and a believer. We can be uncertain logically whether or not God exists and yet believe that God exists. Alternatively, we can be uncertain logically whether or not God exists and yet believe that God does not exist.

For many people, a belief system doesn't work unless they are certain that it is true. Please consider the possibility that your belief system, whatever it is, may be valuable to you even if you can't prove that it is true ... and may we all place less emphasis on proving the truth of our belief system and more emphasis on understanding and explaining its benefits (and faults).