Noachide Laws: A Viable Option as an Alternative for Full Conversion to Judaism?

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1 On the Search for a Noachide Home

In most mainstream churches, proselytising activities towards Jews are, on theological grounds, abandoned, and attention has changed into dialogue with Jews. In a recent interview, Dineke Houtman, Professor of Jewish Studies with a focus on the relation between Judaism and Christianity, argued that Jewish-Christian dialogue barely exists in the Netherlands.1 She correctly emphasized that Christians ought to study Ancient Judaism in order to better understand their own identity; they should realize that Jewish-Christian relations are not symmetrical and that most Jews are not interested at all in a special dialogue with Christians. It is a rather modern phenomenon, appearing after the Second World War, that more Christians like to convert to Judaism than Jews want to convert to Christianity. Many of those Christians, eager to convert, have experienced that they are not always welcomed wholeheartedly in Judaism. Instead of being allowed full conversion, they are encouraged to study the Noachide laws. Most Jews reject any kind of Jewish proselytising zeal and they see the Noachide laws as the outstretched hand of Judaism towards non-Jews. Those interested in Judaism—not only but mainly Christians or former Christians—are often advised to study these laws and live by them. There is a growing number of specific organisations to help these so-called Noachides to find their way. In particular the Lubavitch Chabad Movement is very active in this respect. The seven Noachide laws are the following: adjudication (or the creating of justice in courts) as a positive commandment; the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, sexual immorality, bloodshed, and robbery, and the eating of a limb torn from a living animal.

For some of those interested in Judaism, however, the advice to practise the Noachide Laws is not enough. They seek full conversion ‘under the wings of

the *Shekhinah*, i.e. joining the Jewish people, and do not regard keeping the Noachide laws as viable alternative for full conversion to Judaism. Others experience the invitation to study the Noachide commandments as a chance to find an ethical and ideological closeness to Judaism, without full-fledged conversion. As an elaboration and refinement of an earlier article, I will describe now, besides some historical observations, developments in recent times of a growing appreciation of the Noachide laws and I will sketch a variety of attempts to establish new organisations for Noachidism.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a fresh awareness of and interest in the Noachide commandments became apparent within Christian communities. In response to the fierce anti-Judaism and even anti-Semitism within Christian history, a strong interest in Judaism developed, especially in many centres for the study of Judaism that were blooming at that time. Some Christians felt no longer at home within institutional Christianity and were looking for a new spiritual inspiration. A conversion to Judaism was too big a step for these seekers, for whom maintaining the Noachide commandments seemed a more viable option. In various publications, a number of Dutch theologians have referred to the Noachide commandments. Willem Zuidema and Jos op ’t Root wrote a book on the significance of the Noachide commandments. In this publication, in which beside a lot of fundamental Talmudic information, especially the question was considered whether these commandments could provide ‘a Jewish code for non-Jews’. Could these commandments perhaps be helpful in providing ‘an ethical and spiritual home’ for those seekers, who turned away from institutional Christianity? A few years later René Süss (at that time still pastor of the Netherlands Reformed Church, but since then returned to the home of Judaism) made a plea for the acceptance of the Noachide commandments within the Christian community. He questioned whether it might be a sign of solidarity, if Jews and Christians would meet one another at the kosher butcher. Since these first beginnings at the end of the last century, these ideas have been developed and shaped further.

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