GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE GOYIM?
SAMUEL HIRSCH AND SAMUEL HOLDHEIM ON
CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Noahide Commandments is undoubtedly the oldest and most prominent Jewish doctrine concerning non-Jews still maintained today (Novak 1983). More specific views on the status of Christianity (and/or Islam) were formulated in the course of the Middle Ages and modernity. These views were not abstract exercises in thought but prompted by experiences Jews had living as a minority amongst Christian or Muslim majorities. Jews and Christians or Jews and Muslims, as monotheists, were thought to be more closely related than members of other religious groups. Neither the nature of this monotheism nor the nature of this relationship, however, is self-evident, and over the course of centuries they have been and are still being negotiated.

Whereas Christians have traditionally regarded the relationship between Christianity and Judaism as one of supersession whereby that which comes later is better and replaces that which was earlier, Jews have often maintained a model of derivation. In this model Judaism represents the most original and pure form of monotheism; Christianity and Islam are derivative and hence watered down versions of Judaism. Judaism is intended for Jews, and the derivative monotheistic forms are intended for non-Jews who are not capable or not yet capable of accepting monotheism in its Mosaic, i.e. most pure and unadulterated form (so too Maimonides; see Novak 1989, 57–72). In other words, Christianity and/or Islam is good enough for the Goyim (more positively formulated by John Pawlikowski as ‘Judaism for the Gentiles’; Pawlikowski 2000, 25–48), the most they can deal with, serving to prepare the way for a universal Judaism in messianic times. What the repercussions of Christianity’s status as a derivative religion are for both Christians and the world in the present is not always clear. Are Christians better off than pagans who will also turn to monotheism at the end of time? Is
the world in the here and now in some way improved by pagans becoming Christians or Muslims?

The answers to these questions vary according to place and time. This paper will specifically and briefly address the attitudes of two prominent nineteenth-century German Jewish thinkers, Samuel Holdheim and Samuel Hirsch. Holdheim was a Talmudic prodigy who was to become one of the most radical reformers of Judaism in Germany. Hirsch, a devotee of Hegel, was famous for his systematic philosophy first formulated in *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden* (Hirsch 1842). As will become evident, their attitudes toward non-Jewish society in general and Christianity in particular are inseparably linked to the notions non-Jews voiced about Jews in the public debates on Jewish citizenship taking place throughout Western Europe. Jews often felt the need to refute claims of Christianity’s superiority. But Christian critique of Jews was not the only critique with which Jews had to contend. The Enlightenment ideal and philosophy, and subsequently Marxism, entailed criticism of religion in general and of both Judaism and Christianity in particular. This criticism of Judaism was not free of Christian prejudice and thus, even when criticizing Christianity, often maintained a view of Christianity as somehow higher on the ladder of true humanity. For Hegel, for example, religious consciousness and philosophic consciousness were divided not only in form but also in content. Religion contains the truth of absolute spirit only in the form of representation. Philosophy grasps this truth in the form of a concept, changing the contents of the religious consciousness fundamentally. Moreover, Hegel maintained the notion that evil was the necessary means to good. According to Hegel, man began in a state of nature and set himself in opposition to it—thereby sinning. This inescapable situation left man in a state of permanent enslavement. The philosophical negation of this situation meant freedom or virtue and was closely linked to the Christian doctrine of original sin overcome by the Incarnation. It was precisely this concept that Jewish thinkers including Hirsch perceived as alien to Judaism (see Liebeschütz 1967, 1–42 and Brumlik 2000, 196–249). Kant, emphasizing the ethical, distinguished between rational religion and law. In rational religion one chose to do good freely, while under the law one chose to do good out of fear or reward. Whereas Kant identified Christianity with true religion whereby ethical behaviour is a matter of free will, he regarded Judaism as a statutory religion of coercion (see Eisen 1998, 23–30). Aside from Kant and Hegel, one critic in particular had