In a *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* article, I once described Michael Kogan as a “troublemaker” (I Kings 18:17) in the Zion of Christian-Jewish dialogue. He tends to push the boundaries of conventional thinking, and is not afraid of controversy. The book under review offers further evidence of that. During the 1980s, we were both residents of Montclair, New Jersey. Reading this book reminds me of those days’ stimulating conversations about religion and politics, richly spiced with good food, beverages, and charming stories about his beloved Charleston, South Carolina. In light of those experiences, I was not surprised to read that our author loves Thanksgiving, “which combines three of my great enthusiasms: God, country, and good food.” He had a way of turning parties into positive dialogue sessions, the mark—I thought—of a professor worth one’s tuition fees.

During the 1990s, after I had moved out of state, communication between us ceased, except indirectly, via exchanges published in the *National Dialogue Newsletter* and *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. Two articles by Kogan, “Toward Total Dialogue” and “A Jewish Theology of Christianity”, provoked a good deal of debate. Some of my contributions to that debate have been reprinted as chapter three in my book *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: Exploring our Commonalities and our Differences* (Hebraic Heritage Press, 2005). There were many things on which we agreed, as well as some things about which we argued. Let me summarize some of the points made then and there.

1) Kogan’s insistence that the theological re-orientation vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism had its starting-point in 1965 with Vatican II and the document *Nostra Aetate* struck me as a historical distortion. In fact, and as recognized by the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands had adopted a confessional statement with a specifically anti-supersessionist article on Israel in 1947—something unique in Christianity’s credal history. Also, in 2007 a number of Christian agencies commemorated the 60th anniversary of the “Ten Points of Seelisburg” issued by the International Council of Christians and Jews. Nor are the colloquia that were conducted under auspices of the World Council of Churches to be ignored; the Bossey Consultation in 1949, with the participation of the theological pioneer James Parkes, was particularly noteworthy.

2) I enthusiastically welcomed Kogan’s proposal for “total dialogue” in which nothing would be held back, and through which we might move from mutual respect to mutual influence. I, too, had on several occasions called attention to a growing tiredness with a too circumscribed dialogue agenda.

3) As a published proponent of a theology of the Kingdom of God, I was pleased to note Kogan’s repeated references to that central biblical theme.
With respect to ecclesiastical/ecumenical pronouncements, particularly those dealing with the issue of God’s lasting covenant with Israel and the implications for Christian mission, I cautioned against premature assumptions about a consensus among “mainstream” churches. I argued that the language of such statements is frequently “purposely ambiguous, expressing perhaps appreciation (even admiration) for Jewish faithfulness to Torah, while at the same time presupposing the universal nature of the church’s apostolate.”

I briefly raised the issue of so-called “Messianic Jews” as an illustration of a non-gentile Christian witness to the Jewish community. Today, more than ever, we are basically dealing with an internal Jewish debate in which some Christians and some local congregations show a major interest. Few denominations continue to officially sponsor missions to the Jews. I count myself among those who believe that there are important theological issues at stake in this growing movement.

I registered an emphatic “No” to the notion that Christianity can live with a messianic faith defined “in an internalized and spiritualized way unknown to mainstream Judaism.” Such a heresy would, in my opinion, amount to nothing less than suicide for the church and its mission to the world.

Now that we have entered a new decade and a new millennium, books have replaced our articles. With expansion of the texts, our agreements and arguments have multiplied as well. In addition to the titles already referenced, my latest book, *Judaism-Christianity-Paganism: A Judeo-Christian Worldview and its Cultural Implications* (2007) is also relevant to the discussion.

Some of the points made above apply equally to Kogan’s book. I regret that the historical distortion mentioned in my first point is repeatedly perpetuated in the book. On a related issue, I wish to make a correction; or at least offer a clarification. In my JES piece, I suggested that Kogan held the position that the Christ-centered *kerygma* of the church has no relevance for Jews. I should have said “no *redemptive* relevance.” Because, according to Kogan, Jesus came into the world to bring gentiles into the covenant and, through them, the God of Israel was made known across the globe, the “Jesus-event” is, therefore, of significance to Jews, but what the church came to confess as the “Christ-event” has no *salvific* implications for Jews.

The issue of the ambiguity of language in ecclesiastical/ecumenical pronouncements returns writ large in the book. Where Christians wrestle with dialectics and paradox, Kogan tends to see contradiction. For instance, how can one *logically* claim that Israel is still God’s covenant people and then hold that Jesus’ messianic ministry (the “Christ-event”) has profound faith implications for Jews as well as gentiles? Israel is special, and the missionary imperative for the church is universal. For Christians, that poses a dilemma; for Kogan it involves contradiction.

Of course, there is a way of removing the dialectical tension and make things logical. One such way, apparently endorsed by Kogan, is a two-covenant theology à la Franz Rosenzweig: gentiles come to the Father by way of Jesus, while Jews are already with the Father and have no such need beyond the way of Torah. So, please--just leave us alone.
The answer, in short, is a pluralist theology of multiple divine revelations as opposed to an alleged Christian exclusivism. Kogan recognizes that the kind of pluralism he prefers is not likely to be adopted by the churches in the foreseeable future. He takes comfort in the thought, however, that a few Christian pronouncements seem to point in that direction.

Kogan cites three such statements: one by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (1972); one by the Synod of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland (1980); and a third one by the Texas Conference of Churches (1982). For various reasons, I don’t take the third document seriously. As for the Methodist statement, it declared that *dialogue meetings* are not the proper occasion for evangelizing activities—an almost universally accepted rule. It is basically a piece of common sense advice, not a doctrinal position on the nature and mission of the church. By the same token, the Synod of the Rhineland declared that witness to Jews, the people of the covenant who have received Torah, should not be patterned after Christian missions to the nations (*ta ethna*). Again, this document seeks to address the aforementioned Christian dilemma, not offer ecclesiastical dogma. I do not know of one official denominational declaration that explicitly adopts a theology of equally valid multiple divine revelations.

I believe that much of what I consider to be misreadings of Christianity are rooted in Kogan’s misinterpretation of St. Paul. The apostle’s theology is portrayed as both brilliant and inconsistent. The letter to the Galatians, we read, contradicts what he writes to the church in Rome, and also conflicts with his message to the Corinthians. I have dealt extensively with Pauline theology and the Mosaic law in an essay, entitled “Torah and Kerygma,” that was originally prepared for the Christian Scholars Group on Judaism and has been reprinted in my 2007 book. The issues are too complex to summarize in a few sentences here.

Kogan does not specifically deal with the subject of “Messianic Jews” who practice a Torah-based Christianity (at least in a number of respects). He does, however, cite a German theological document suggesting in no uncertain terms that a Jew who heeds the call to Christian discipleship is in effect disloyal to the call every Jew receives from God. As the historical record shows, a call to follow Jesus as Lord of one’s life can come in many forms that do not necessarily involve soul snatching missionaries. It could conceivably come from reading Kogan’s book. After all, who can fathom the mystery of God’s revelational dealings with a human heart and mind?

The articles that form the background for this book, challenging as they were, did not prepare me for the radical (extreme?) nature of the pluralism advocated by Kogan. As a devout Jew, he delights in the Torah tradition (as did Paul – Romans 7:22). The God of Israel is portrayed as a liberator and lawmaker—the Lord of history. However, a-historical revelations might do quite well for non-Jews—Buddhists, Hindus, etc. They too have revelational truth experiences, breakthroughs of transcendence that may not necessarily involve a supernatural reality (no doubt, a Pauline nightmare).
The final paragraphs of the book say it all. If revelations of the divine and the human are also to be found in the “highest religions”, then all faiths are true that lead us from egocentricity to participation in the infinite life with all its ethical and spiritual blessings.” By what norms, one wonders, do we determine the standards for eligibility to that circle of morally acceptable religions? Nazi neo-Paganism with its faith in Blut und Boden could obviously not pass the test of correct ethical conduct. The manifold contemporary neo-Paganisms and New Age spiritualities, however, would seem to fit the mold quite nicely. The above language about “participation in the infinite life” sounds like a speaking in tongues they understand.

In the realm of theory, all this may add up to a neat intellectual construct. In the realm of history—where religions are not just about revelational truth experiences, but function as culture-shaping forces—it is a different story, however. This variant of pluralism reminds me of the fog in which all cows are grey.

In several places, Kogan comments on Israelite faith as characterized by a balance between particularist and universalist themes. It seems to me that in the grand metanarrative of biblical revelation, the themes of particularity and universality exist not so much in balance as in dialectical tension. It is always a great temptation to resolve such tensions with the use of logical schemes. In the biblical drama, as well as in a Christian theology of the Kingdom of God, the central plot is one of particularity: the election of Israel; the Jew Jesus as representative of Israel who reveals God’s saving love for the whole wide world; the calling of the church and the incorporation of gentiles into the deeply rooted tree of God’s covenant with Israel. However, it is a core plot of particularity with a universalist vision.

The world—not Israel, not the church, not even the Messiah—constitutes the ultimate agenda of divine redemption. The “New Testament” offers cosmic perspectives (Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:19-20) and the theme of “all things” (ta panta) resounds throughout the gospel, as I repeatedly point out in my 2007 book. The operation of God’s Spirit is not confined to Israel or the church. Therefore, there is no reason to view all other religions as a mass of monstrous darkness.

For me, however, the key question is this: Does not a truly biblical theology require that the universal be interpreted in light of particular core events? The resultant dialectical tension is something, I believe, we have to live with until the final eschaton. The journey of faith is full of such tensions and resolving them prematurely will land us not on a solid rock of logic, but in a morass of theological mush.

My critical remarks notwithstanding, I recommend this book as must reading for all who are interested in Christian-Jewish relations. According to Cervantes, “the road is always better than the inn.” In my view, that is not always true; but in this case I found the journey to be better than the destination. I have always believed that honest dialogue will have a confrontational edge to it. There is plenty of that in this book. I hope that this work will be widely discussed, and lead to dialogues that will display a critical candor equal to the author’s