

# Tradition and Transformation

- as understood in Judaism and African Traditional Religion

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Overall framework

Christianity places high importance on the belief in certain doctrines. Underlying this is the premise that that is because these doctrines encapsulate the highest truth. From within a Christian framework, it is easy to think that truth is at least one of the highest values for all religions and thus when relating to other faiths, there is a temptation to begin with a comparison between the 'truths' of Christianity and these other religions, with a view to proving why Christianity is more true. However, this is often an unhelpful place to start when relating to other faiths, not simply because it contains a high potential for acting in an arrogant, offensive and disrespectful manner, but also because other faiths do not necessarily place such a high value on truth or 'belief in' and thus it is not likely to lead to particularly meaningful communication.

Within both the Jewish religion as a whole and many African indigenous religions (of which we will focus on one – Vodun), belief in a set of doctrines is of less importance. What is important to each, are the following ideas: religious practices as a way of life, participation in the rituals of the community and a religious focus on life in the here and now with little focus on an afterlife. God as absolute truth is seen in a very different way from Christianity. In this respect both Judaism and Vodun share marked similarities that distinguish them. Two themes that emerge as particularly significant within both Judaism and Vodun are that of tradition and transformation. However, both are also complex and differ from each other in terms of the emphasis they place on these themes and the style and manner in which they are enacted in religious practice.

Judaism is more heavily focused on the theme of tradition as a way of remembering and reproducing Jewish identity. The theme of transformation does however appear through rituals such as Yom Kippur etc. Vodun, in contrast, places greater emphasis on the importance of rituals that emphasise transformation, primarily through possession by the *loa*. The theme of tradition can however, be seen within Vodun in the way that the repetition and transmission of transformative rituals has served to maintain a common identity for a people thrown into chaos and confusion, via the experience of the transatlantic slave trade. In this respect, some interesting parallels emerge between both Judaism and Vodun around the theme of memory and the maintenance of a communal identity, which must also be regularly renewed. Finally, we turn our attention back to Christianity and ask, "What might Christianity learn from both Judaism and Vodun?"

### Christianity – 'belief in' true doctrine

In order to be considered a Christian, it is essential that you 'believe in' certain key doctrines; the articles of faith. Over time huge amounts of effort have gone towards deciding whether certain beliefs were Christian or not, i.e. heretical. Whilst there are differences between the beliefs of different Christian denominations, what is similar to all denominations is that the question, "What do you believe?" is of central importance to the



definition of your faith. However, this is not necessarily the case for all religions. If you ask a Jewish person “What do you believe?” depending upon what type of Jew they are, you would find a very broad range of answers, from atheist to traditional religious Judaism, and even Buddhist ideas. Similarly in many African Indigenous religions, the question would be rather confusing as the focus is not on belief in certain key ‘truths’ but on the practice of and participation in the rituals of the religion. So to some extent in both there is not the same focus on *belief* but rather on *practice*.

## INTRODUCING VODUN

### Background to Vodun

Africa is an enormous continent, containing within it a vast diversity of cultures and religious practices. Historically, it has been influenced by both Islam and Christianity and each of these have been influential at several different points in their own historical development e.g. the Coptic Christianity of Ethiopia is markedly different to Christian churches in Ghana influenced by American missionaries such as Derek Prince. *An Africa indigenous religion* is a term often used to describe those religious practices, which seem to predate the influence of either Islam or Christianity on the continent. Whilst it not perfect as a term, containing within it the potential to suggest that these religions are a homogenous set. It is preferable to the term animism as it locates the definition of these religious practices in their geographical location rather than in their beliefs, which, as we will see, are not the central focus. African indigenous religions do differ significantly from each other; the religious practices of the nomadic Kalahari Kung-San are quite different to the Aladura churches.

However encompassed within the range of African indigenous religions can be found the following common concepts and practices: religious communities/ritual congregations; spirit fields; relating to the spirits via invocation, exchanges and mediums; ritual performance, participation in the ritual; a focus on the experiential; relating to the ancestors; healing, divination and prophecy; fortune, misfortune and the healing metaphor; witchcraft; “seeing” and “knowing”; non-rational forms of cognition; the ambiguities of religious power; chiefs, witches and sanctified medicines (that which can heal can also harm).

In order to do justice to the diversity of African indigenous religion, a specific focus will be given to one indigenous religious practice –Vodun (sometimes called Voodoo or Vodoun). Vodun has its origins in Dahomey (in what is now Benin) but via the transatlantic slave trade it was transported to Haiti.

### Basic information about Vodun

- *Founded:* Brought to Haiti in mid 1600’s via the Atlantic slave trade. The dominant influence was from the religious practices of the Fon-speaking people of Dahomey (now Benin). However, contained within Vodun are also influences from the Congo region, Yoruba influence from what is modern day Nigeria and other less influential strands from other parts of West Africa. Religions carrying similar hallmarks are common throughout the West African diaspora e.g. Santeria in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil. In Haiti we find, “Temples, organized clergy, a rather complicated ritual,



sophisticated dances and rhythms. In spite of a brutal uprooting from their own social milieu, the slaves contrived to resurrect, in exile, the religious framework in which they had been brought up. Bokono (magicians) and vodu-no (priests), trained in Africa, taught the following generations, born in slavery, the names and characteristics of the gods and the sacrifices required” (Metraux, 1959, 30).

- *Key figures:* Houngan/Mambo (Priest/Priestess), hunsis serve the gods
- *Supreme Being/s:* the Loa or Mysteres are supernatural beings, the worship of which is the essential purpose of Vodun. The most important of them belong to the Fon and the Yoruba – Legba, Damballah-wedo, the Aida-wedo (his wife), Hevieso, Agassu, Ezili, Agwe-taroyo, Zaka, Ogu, Shango and many others still have shrines in the towns and villages of Togo, Dahomey and Nigeria. There is some mention of a highest principle – Mawu – the religion of Dahomey but this is occasional and much less significant than the loa.
- *Key texts:* None, the central importance is on the oral tradition, especially in the context of plantation society.
- *Key dates:* No historical human beings of specific importance, specific dates do not appear to be particularly relevant.
- *Place of worship:* Humfo/hounfor – a religious centre somewhat like an extended family compound, certain spaces are considered more sacred than others but domestic activities are carried out within it (see picture).
- *Word for community:* Societé, during the ritual others become involved as audience, a concept that African religions historian Louis Brenner has described as the, ‘Ritual Congregation’.
- *Name origin:* In Dahomey and Togo, among tribes belonging to the Fon language group, a ‘Voodoo’ is a ‘god’, a ‘spirit’, a ‘sacred object’.
- *Afterlife:* Return to Guinee, the Haitian peasant thinks of Guinea and Dahomey as mythical countries.
- *So called ‘syncretism’ with Catholicism:* It is often argued that Vodun is a mixture of West African religion and Catholicism, however, the role of power in this exchange must be accounted for and there are valid arguments to suggest that the incorporation of Catholic names for the loa was as much to mask the ongoing practice of Vodun and ensure its survival as representing any sort of conversion. This seems likely in the context of Article 2 of the Code Noir (1685), which noted that:

“All slaves who come to our islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion.”

### **Negative associations of the word Voodoo**

Alfred Metraux, an anthropologist whose work *Voodoo in Haiti* is an excellent source of first hand detail on the religious practices of Vodun, has this to say about the negative connotations of the word voodoo:

*“Certain exotic words are charged with an evocative power. Voodoo is one. It usually conjures up visions of mysterious deaths, secret rites – or dark saturnalia celebrated by ‘blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened Negroes. The picture of Voodoo, which this book will give, may seem pale beside such images. In fact – what is Voodoo? Nothing more than a conglomeration of beliefs and rites of African origin, which, having been closely*



*mixed with Catholic practice, has come to be the religion of the greater part of the peasants and the urban proletariat of the black republic of Haiti. Its devotees ask of it what men have always asked of religion: remedy for ills, satisfaction for needs and the hope of survival.”* (Metraux, 1959, 15)

## **Where do these negative associations and images come from?**

Several writers during the colonial period of plantation slavery wrote about Vodun and in part its representation and consequent ‘dangerous’ image stem from these texts. For example, writers such as American W.H Seabrook and the British Consul Spencer St. John *Haiti or the Black Republic* (1884) – referred to ‘sinister practices’ and alleged cannibalism. Gustave Aymard’s adventure story *Les Vaudoux*, described Vodun as, “a lot of fanatics thirsting for blood and power”. The U.S. occupation of Haiti 1915 – 1934 reignited western fascination with Vodun and this continued in the Hollywood concept of the zombie, which has roots in Haiti. During the 1940’s the Catholic Church carried out a campaign ‘against superstition’ and mass piles of Vodun ritual objects were collected and burned.

## **INTRODUCING JUDAISM**

### **Background to Judaism**

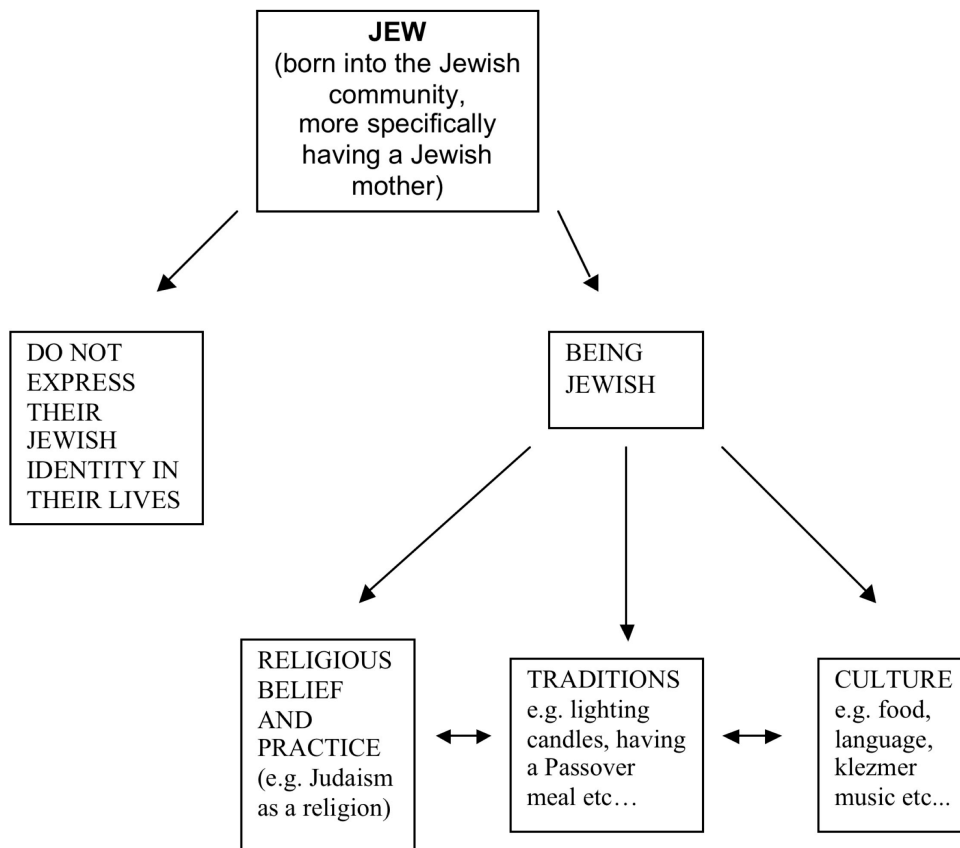
When looking into Judaism, it is important to make certain distinctions to define exactly what it is we are referring to. To be a *Jew* isn’t necessarily the same as following *Judaism* as a religious structure. Being a Jew is an identity given from birth, it is like a nationality, people are Jews because they are born into a Jewish family and have Jewish heritage and blood. When it comes, then, to ‘being Jewish’, there are three main aspects which, once identified and separated, can help to describe the different ways there are of expressing that Jewish identity.

Firstly there is what we will call *culture*. These are things specific to a Jewish way of life or thinking that you may find characterizing any culture. For example, music: particular to Ashkenazi Jewish culture you would find *klezmer* music. Another example is language: Jews in diaspora have over time developed their own specific languages and dialects pertaining to the regions they were in, giving us Ladino (the Spanish Jews), Yiddish (relating to German, spoken by German and Eastern European Jews) and Judeo-Arabic dialects of the Jews living in the Arab world, these of course along with Hebrew in Israel which had up until 1948 and the establishment of the Israeli State, been the dormant universal language of the Bible and religious practices. There are of course also particular foods and art forms that have come to represent Jewish culture, again varying according to the region.

After general culture, a second means of expressing what it is to be Jewish is found in the *traditions*. Some of these traditions may be grounded in religion but ultimately they are rituals and customs, which may be carried out by any Jew, not only the highly religious Jews. Such traditions include lighting the candles at *Shabbat* (Sabbath), partaking in a *Seder* meal at Passover, or fasting on Yom Kippur for example.



The third way of expressing what it is to be Jewish, is in religious belief and practice, often referred to as *orthodoxy*. This would mean basing ones life on belief in the one God and following the Torah and its rules and practices as precisely as possible and according to rabbinical interpretation. The traditions that we will refer to as coming under the umbrella of Judaism strictly speaking are ones that come directly from the *Torah* scriptures, or something that has been written or established by a religious authority and then come to be accepted universally amongst the Jewish community. The following diagram is helpful to show this:



It is important to remember that these three aspects of what it is to be Jewish are in no way mutually exclusive, you would find many Jews of course who live out their Jewish lives in religious belief, Jewish tradition and Jewish culture. Generally speaking, as you move towards the left-hand boxes within 'being Jewish' you will probably find that the right hand ones will have been accepted also. So it is likely, therefore, that someone who stops at traditions, for example, would also accept the culture, and someone who goes as far left as the religious beliefs, would probably accept traditions and culture. Of course each individual Jew would live out different components within each of these boxes and to differing degrees.

A fourth dimension is Zionism, which was born in late nineteenth century Europe as a national liberation movement for the Jewish People, emerging from joint roots in European socialism and nationalism. Part of the Zionist project is the creation of the "New Jew", who is subject not object, majority not minority. He/she is a Jew defined by his/her will rather



than that of others and, in most Zionisms and in the most politically powerful forms of Zionism, is secular and political, therefore not defined by either religion or chicken soup (Jewish culture).

## RITUAL AND LIFE

### Ritual participation not doctrine

#### VODUN

The adherence to key doctrines or beliefs is not a concern for Vodun as Metraux clearly states:

“Voodoo is a religion which is practiced by autonomous cult groups of which each often has its own peculiar custom and tradition. Whatever anyone may say to the contrary, there is no Voodoo liturgy and doctrine to which priests and priestesses are obliged to conform. Such an idea is a widespread illusion which we must avoid”.<sup>1</sup>

Most houngan and mambo don't trouble themselves with theological speculation. Taking great trouble to set down all the precise inter-relationships between all the various loa is not their main preoccupation. Maya Deren, an American avant-garde filmmaker and dancer who spent a significant amount of time filming Vodun rituals, describes it thus, “Vodun is first concerned with men's acts, not with their feelings. The use of the phrase “I serve”, rather than, “I believe” reflects this emphasis upon the objective fact of function rather than the subjective condition”.

#### JUDAISM

Being Jewish is not based upon acceptance of a particular set of doctrines or beliefs, it is not even dependant upon following certain practices, it is an identity in your very nature and birth. For this reason it is very difficult to discuss Judaism or the Jews in a generalised way, each member of the Jewish community will live out their 'Jewishness' in a different way to the next. This being the case, then, living out one's Jewish identity comes through following the Jewish religious or cultural laws or practices. Each individual or small community group will of course live out these traditions and practices to a different extent and the trends in this area are moving and shifting constantly with time and across different regions. The first recorded Bat Mitzvah for example was not until the 1920's but has now become an almost universally accepted Jewish tradition. Many Jews may be completely secular in their thinking and in most of their lives and yet express their Jewish identity or religion only by partaking in certain practices on special festivals or even merely by reading the *Jewish Chronicle* newspaper; others may be very devout religiously and live out every aspect of their life according to each minute detail of Jewish law, ritual and thought. Yet both these types of Jew are Jewish as much as each other because being Jewish is about *who you are*.

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<sup>1</sup> Metraux, 1959, 19



To give an indication of this disparity, here are some statistics from the modern Jewish world. Jews who:

Attend a Passover Seder	85%
Fast on Yom Kippur	61%
Light Hanukkah candles	77%
Light Sabbath candles	44%
Maintain Synagogue or temple worship	41%
Have visited Israel	31%
Eat kosher meat only	17%
Attend weekly services	11%

Being Jewish, then, is about being a part of a community of people. It is interesting here to make a comparison with Christianity where many people in the modern Western church would not consider to be Christians those who do not believe a set of doctrinal principles, follow Jesus in their lives or attend church (weekly). This is not the same within Judaism. Being Jewish is about being one of a people group, linked to a worldwide set-apart community, and inextricably tied to that same community which has lived out its story throughout history. However, it must be acknowledged that throughout the vast majority of that history, the identity of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion itself were one and the same: the Jewish religion always has been the collective religious thoughts of the Jewish people; from the Roman exile (70CE) up until Napoleon freed the Jews from the ghettos in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Jewish identity was invariably religious Jewish identity, this notion then, of an entirely secular Jew, is a relatively modern phenomenon.

In religious Judaism, however, truth has a more key role and what you believe as a devout religious Jew is very important. Doctrine and theology have opened up centuries of heavy debate and intellectual tussling! The *yeshiva*, (schools to train and teach in the Torah), are often places of heated discussion and argument. The definition of truth, however, might take a slightly different form to a Christian understanding of truth within our faith. The word “faith” itself is problematic. The key to this problem is in the very name “Israel”, which came from Jacob’s night of wrestling with an angel and which literally means, “to fight against God”. It is deep within the culture and religion that one should question everything and never accept blindly on “faith”. Truth should be accepted because one deduces through logic and reason that it is true and never because it is what one hopes for or believes or trusts to be true; as the old Jewish saying states, “Two Jews, five opinions”. With regard to essential accepted truths, then, in his commentary on the Mishnah (tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10), Maimonides, the pre-eminent medieval Jewish philosopher, formulates his 13 principles of faith:

1. The existence of God
2. God's unity
3. God's spirituality and incorporeality
4. God's eternity
5. God alone should be the object of worship
6. Revelation through God's prophets
7. The pre-eminence of Moses among the prophets
8. God's law given on Mount Sinai
9. The immutability of the Torah as God's Law



10. God's foreknowledge of human actions
11. Reward of good and retribution of evil
12. The coming of the Jewish Messiah
13. The resurrection of the dead

These are the principles of faith, which are accepted within Orthodox Judaism; however, post holocaust, many Jews struggle particularly with Maimonides' 11th principle.

Nearly all day-to-day Jewish expressions of religious worship are ritual and action based. They involve doing certain things at a particular time in a specific way. The practices in themselves are not what make the experience significant, it is what the practices lead us to in our hearts that is important. One Jewish scholar writes, "Lighting a candle is no more meaningful than picking up a hammer. What is important is that you can use a candle to build a Sabbath experience in your home. Ritual has the power to make the mundane holy and, with time, open the heart."<sup>2</sup> This concept is called Kavanah.

### **Religion is intertwined with daily life**

#### *VODUN*

Until recently, the social unit of the Haitian countryside was the extended family, the children, married or unmarried, and the grandchildren. Each family had its house or field. The whole group of conjugal families, all closely related, was called the 'compound' (laku), and its houses and granaries often made up a hamlet. Its members were further bound together by worship of their common root loa (loa-racines), that is to say the gods and protecting spirits of the extended family, which were inherited just like property. The compound head kept a little sanctuary or humfo for his gods and there, in the presence of his kin, he officiated. A houngan and mambo were called upon only in the event of serious illness or to 'feed' the family gods. The public rituals of the hounfor are, in a sense, an extension of the principles, which govern a family, where the cooperative participation of all the members (including the children) is necessary for survival.

Religious Ritual mediates between the world of gods and men. The role of religion is to mediate between the world of the spirits/ancestors and the world of men. The loa need to be propitiated appropriately. Unlike Christian conceptions of God in which God is pure goodness or truth, the Loa are ambiguous in character and can behave benevolently or spitefully depending on the behaviour of the devotee. If the sacrifices have been carried out correctly and the devotee has demonstrated the significance of the Loa through their worship, it is anticipated that the Loa will look favourably upon them. However, if the sacrifice is neglected, for example if a Loa enables a devotee to receive a sum of money to invest, if no portion of the earnings are dedicated back to the Loa, they may become angry and visit punishment on the devotee in the form of illness or bad luck. They may simply withdraw their support or protection resulting in the failure of crops or business pursuits. A Marbial peasant sums up the relationship between men and the loa thus:

"The loa love us, protect us and guard us. They tell us what is happening to our relations who live far away, they suggest to us remedies which bring us relief if we are sick...If we

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<sup>2</sup> Ari L. Goldman





are hungry the loa appear to us in a dream and say, "Take courage: you will earn money" and the promised money comes".<sup>3</sup>

There are also other spirits, who are willing to assist ill-intentioned people and who are feared for their violence and cruelty, but these should be called diab (devils). Decent people have nothing to do with them and if they fall under their power they try to appease them before sinking to crime. No more than man does God approve the activities of the bad loa, the 'bought loa', whom sorcerers use for their shady machinations. Mediation between the loa and the world of men takes place via dreams or through rituals in which participants become possessed by different loa who make their wishes known.

## JUDAISM

Personal growth is important in Judaism but is done through keeping the *law* and following *rituals with Kavanagh*; this is the way to connect with God. Ritual also has the power to connect the community, not only in one area, but also across the world as a whole and then across the whole of history. Lighting the candle connects the Jew to millions of other Jews who are also lighting that same candle at the same time around the world; all of those Jews are forming a direct link with all the other Jews throughout history who have lit that candle in the same way for centuries. These rituals and traditions, then, do not only call to a worship experience with God, but also affirm one's place as a part of a community of God's set apart people

### **Participation in the faith community ritual is essential**

## VODUN

Ensuring the favour of the loa is the essential task within Vodun and thus participation in the rituals that enable communication with them is essential. In a Vodun ceremony the ritual congregation is comprised of the loa, the serviteurs and the audience. The audience will be participating not only emotionally, but also actively. Onlookers may sing and dance, they may be commanded to salute the loa, they may shout comments on what is happening and, above all, they will be resting participants. The houngan/mambo may be compared with the master of ceremonies, responsible for the correct procedure and with a conductor, his/her asson being the baton and the drummers the orchestra. The hounsis are the dancers and choir, in dance and acting, performing their specifically set parts with freedom of improvisation. Their costumes and paraphernalia are comparable to stage costumes and props, these of course being more elaborate the wealthier the *société*.

The rites are not symbolic of something; they are functional, what Deren describes as, "the rites as collective discipline". In effect, argues Deren, "nothing is more meaningless or perplexing to the Haitian that to ask what some ritual action, "represents", "stands for" or "symbolizes". When food is put down for the loa, the Haitian understands precisely that fact: the loa are being given food: and all ritual action is understood with the same immediacy. The real, visible action of a ritual is not the symbolic statement of some idea; on the contrary, it would be the verbal statement, the metaphysical concept, or the abstract

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<sup>3</sup> (in Metraux, 1959, 95)



idea which would be understood as a symbol, at one remove from the reality of act or fact".<sup>4</sup>

## JUDAISM

Overwhelmingly community (*Kehila*) is a tremendous part of what it is to be Jewish. Signs of the importance of community can be seen in the way that many rituals and practices are prescribed and carried out. Just about every Jewish tradition involves togetherness, specifying set roles that draw in particular people from the community to share in the practice, actions and words that are constantly linking the community to their historical roots and historical future.<sup>5</sup> To name just a few examples:

- In the Brit (the circumcision) a particular person is appointed to hold the baby during the cutting- This person is assigned a set role and must be someone from within the community (*Kehila*). This person is called the *Sandak*.)
- At the *Bar Mitzvah* (for boys) or *Bat Mitzvah* (for girls) which is the coming of age ceremony, where one becomes a member of the community in ones own right as a recognised adult, a teacher is usually present who passes on ancient words to the new generation, directly connecting the act of joining the present day community with the notion of becoming bound also with the historical Jewish community of the past.
- At a wedding, the bride and groom are given *Shomrim*, who are given the role of royal guards, to escort the bride and groom to the wedding canopy.
- In death itself, Jewish law prescribes that members of the family and friends should take it in turns to watch the body at the brier until the point of burial, the family will also sit for seven days while people from the community come and visit them and console them, this is called *Shivah*.

All these practices show that community is deeply embedded in the very outworking of Jewish life, there is no way to carry out these practices individualistically or independently of the community- at least not that would be recognised as a Jewish way! This strong communal bond is also evident in the fact that virtually all Jewish prayers and liturgy are written and said in the plural, recited as a collective, even when said alone. The two most central and most recited liturgical passages which sit among prayers in Jewish life, the *Shema*<sup>6</sup> and the *Aleinu*<sup>7</sup>, are both said as 'we' rather than 'I', even though *Shema*, which

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<sup>4</sup> (Deren, 1953, 194)

<sup>5</sup> We will look at this in more depth later

<sup>6</sup> Israel, remember this, the Lord -and the Lord alone- is our God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength. Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6v4-9) So then, obey the commands I have given you today: love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart. If you do, He will send rain on your land whenever you need it, in the autumn and in the spring so that there will be corn, wine and olive oil for you and grass for your livestock. You will have all the food you want. Do not let yourselves be led from the Lord to worship and serve other gods. If you do, the Lord will become angry with you. He will hold back the rain and your ground will become too dry for crops to grow. Then you will soon die there, even though it is a good land that he is giving you. Remember these commands and cherish them. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder. Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates. Then you and your children will live a long time in the land that

begins 'love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul and strength', is probably the passage that most reflects an individual or personal relationship with God and obedience of His commands. Even with this said, God speaks to them as a whole stating that he will either bless the land with rain or hold it back according to their obedience, this, along with the instruction to pass the commands on to their children, which again, shows that even serving God and being obedient to His commands is a collective act. The Aleinu is divided into two rough halves, the first being a reminder of the Jews' identity and responsibility as a collective people group; an affirmation of the fact that they are a community chosen and set apart by God. The second part of the passage defines what they are chosen *for*. The emphasis changes, then, to reaching out to the nations in longing that they will come to know and worship the one true God and that He will establish His rule over the whole earth. This vision is the hope of the historical future, which we mentioned before also known as the Messianic epoch, the time of the Messiah's coming, when the world will be restored to complete Justice and *Shalom*.

When trying to identify what binds the Jewish community together so tightly, there are some influential factors that we could draw out:

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the Lord your God has promised to give to your ancestors. You will live there as long as there is sky above the earth. (Deut. 11 v 13-21) The Lord commanded Moses to say to the people of Israel; 'make tassels on the corners of your garments and put a blue cord on each tassel. You are to do this for all time to come. The tassels will serve as reminders, each time you see them you will remember all my commands and obey them; then you will not turn away from me and follow your own wishes and desires. The tassels will remind you to keep all my commands, and you will belong completely to me. I am the Lord your God; I brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord.' (Numbers 15 v37-41)

<sup>7</sup> ALEINU: It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to acclaim the greatness of the One who forms all creation. For God did not make us like the nations of other lands, and God did not make us the same as other families of the Earth. God did not place us in the same situations as others, and our destiny is not the same as anyone else's.  
And we bend our knees, and bow down, and give thanks, before the Ruler, the Ruler of Rulers, the Holy One, Blessed is God.  
The One who spread out the heavens, and made the foundations of the Earth, and whose precious dwelling is in the heavens above, and whose powerful Presence is in the highest heights.  
Adonai is our God, there is none else.  
Our God is truth, and nothing else compares. As it is written in Your Torah: "And you shall know today, and take to heart, that Adonai is the only God, in the heavens above and on Earth below. There is no other."  
Therefore we put our hope in You, Adonai our God,  
to soon see the glory of Your strength, to remove all idols from the Earth, and to completely cut off all false gods; to repair the world, You holy empire. And for all living flesh to call Your name, and for all the wicked of the Earth to turn to You. May all the world's inhabitants recognize and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue must swear loyalty. Before You, Adonai, our God,  
may all bow down, and give honor to Your precious name, and may all take upon themselves the yoke of Your rule. And may You reign over them soon and forever and always. Because all rule is Yours alone, and You will rule in honor forever and ever.  
As it is written in Your Torah: "Adonai will reign forever and ever."  
And it is said: "Adonai will be Ruler over the whole Earth, and on that day, God will be One, and God's name will be One.



- Most importantly; a common history: the joys and sorrows of the past, the clear and powerfully felt connection with the story.
- Common wisdom: guided and connected by the Torah and Talmud and the Law along with philosophers and writers throughout history, all coming from within the community and expressing the same identity; Maimonides, Herzl, Freud, Einstein.
- Ritual and tradition- where observed this is very important as it brings together all of the above; a common practice which unites the community in present and past.
- Others' perception: the way that others, particularly gentiles identify a person as a Jew, no matter what their criteria. This will affect someone's sense of belonging to that community.<sup>8</sup>

## Religious focus on this life, little focus on an afterlife

### VODUN

Vodun mythology is less concerned with the private life of the spirits than with their dealings with the faithful. Voodoo is a practical and utilitarian religion which cares more for earthly than for heavenly goings-on...The greater part of (its stories) have as theme either the intervention of the loa on behalf of their devotees or the punishment they inflict on those who neglect them. This folklore is developed in the sanctuaries, the normal stages of day-to-day incidents provoked by the loa.

### JEWISHNESS

Death and any notion of the afterlife is a question left completely unanswered in Judaism. The need for reassurance of security in the afterlife is a concept that is not even found. This is in direct contrast with Christianity, in which we often see the notion of the afterlife and faith primarily as means of securing a place in 'heaven' (whatever form that may take) as being absolutely paramount. Keeping the law is not about being saved or being righteous in order to go to 'heaven' it is simply about pleasing God or working towards the Messianic epoch of social justice. Heaven, in Judaism, is not the ideal or the aim, mankind's purpose and what we live for and strive for is all to be found in the world of the here and now, the world of the living. The aim of Judaism 'is not to transport the believer to a private heaven. Instead, it is the impassioned, sustained desire to bring heaven down to earth. Until we have done this, there is still work to do.'<sup>9</sup> There is a challenging idea here in this drive to live here and now, calling us to live as though the only heaven that exists is the one we manage to create on earth by living out the 'way of the Lord'. This is marked out in Genesis as 'doing what is right and just'<sup>10</sup>. These two values are key to Judaism, in Hebrew they are known as *Mishpat*: Justice that is not about revenge or survival of the fittest but where disputes are worked out fairly through analysis by law of the situation and then things are resolved through restoration, and *Tzadakah*: charity that involves justice, the restoration of dignity through a fair distribution of welfare, each giving to the other, in fact even those who are supported by the *Tzadakah* of others must also give in *Tzadakah* themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, (Schocken Books, Paris, 1948)

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Sacks (To Heal a Fractured World 2005 pg. 27)

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 18:17-19



## God as absolute truth is not necessarily a very significant concept

### VODUN and JEWISHNESS

The word 'God' is always on the lips of the Haitians, but it would be unwise to conclude that they feared God or gave God much thought. 'Le Bon Dieu' is a Deus otiosus, if he is anything. God conjures up no precise image and is too far away for there to be much point in addressing him. "He's a nice easy going 'Papa' who wouldn't dream of getting angry or frightening people. With him it will be easy to come to some arrangement when you have to give an account of your life. There's no point therefore in serving Him too seriously" (Mgr. Robert). Practitioners of Vodun feel no imperative to proselytize or convert as God. Likewise is not an important issue in Judaism.

## TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

### Tradition

#### VODUN

In Vodun tradition is expressed in rituals and language. It is an oral tradition, however the language of tradition is not made explicit. It is in the rituals enacted over the centuries that reinforce and strengthen the common identity. Remembering is very important, again maintaining their shared identity, and for this reason they must be acted and re-enacted regularly, in the same way that you find to be the case in Judaism.

#### JUDAISM

In terms of evangelism or proselytising, these are practices not found in Judaism. Although people can and do convert to Judaism, there is no notion of and no focus on evangelism. Rather than it being "faith" that "saves", the focus is on how you live out your day-to-day life as a Jew. In Jewish thought, a gentile has no need for Judaism whatsoever, either to have a relationship with God or to be a just or righteous individual. Being God's people is nothing to do with being *saved*, in fact, it can be and certainly has been to many Jews, a blessing and joy but also a great hardship and burden. Throughout history, being a part of God's people has meant immense suffering and persecution for the majority of Jews. The community is inward looking in terms of its self-preservation, since its survival is not related to the concept Jesus offered of "being fishers of men" but rather to the promise that was given to Abraham about "having descendants that outnumber the stars in the sky". This is demonstrated by looking at the issue of marriage, in the 1950's, only 9% of Jewish marriages were to a non-Jew.<sup>11</sup>

There are, however some key ideas central to Judaism, which are to do with how, they relate to the outside world. One is that which is found in the aforementioned *Aleinu* prayer, which, in its second part, speaks about healing the world. This directly relates to what Reform Judaism calls, *Tikum Olam*, which roughly means fixing, putting right or correcting the world. Jews are meant to feel an immense responsibility on how they behave in the

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<sup>11</sup> There has, however been a distinct shift in this area in more recent times, that percentage rising to 52% in a study made between the years of 1982-85.



world in pursuing acts of *righteousness*, be it through charity, hospitality, fighting for justice etc... The righteous giving of aid to the poor is seen as being extremely important and 'powerful'. Charity is the way in which a person can directly experience God. It is commanded, 'Justice, justice shalt thou follow.'<sup>12</sup> These words should, according to the chief Rabbi Dr Hertz, 'be taken as the cornerstone of the humane legislation of the Torah. The immediate repetition of a word in the Torah is extremely unusual and significant. Isaiah said that, 'The Lord of hosts is exalted through justice, and God the Holy One is sanctified through righteousness.'<sup>13</sup> The Gemara<sup>14</sup> quotes a statement by Rabbi Yehudah on the power of charity: '[Rabbi Yehudah] was wont to say: Ten strong things were created in this world:

A mountain is strong; iron cleaves it  
Iron is strong; fire softens it  
Fire is strong; water extinguishes it.  
Water is strong; clouds bear it  
Clouds are strong; wind scatters them  
Wind is strong; a body bears it.  
A body is strong; fear breaks it  
Fear is strong; wine dispels it  
Wine is strong; sleep lessens its effect  
And death is stronger than all of these!

Yet charity saves from death – as it is written: [Proverbs 10:2] And charity will save from death!

Another key concept, is that of *Kidush Hashem* (sanctifying The Name (of God)) and its counterpart *Khilul Hashem* (desecrating The Name (of God)). This is the idea that we are responsible for how we behave in the world and in our community as everything that we do reflects on God, as we are his advocates and children. I remember being at school and being told that we should continue to obey all the rules even outside of school on our way home; that we mustn't smoke, swear, behave badly and so on, as we were still wearing our school uniforms. People would therefore look at us as representatives, or examples of that school and what it stood for. This is the Jewish concept of *Kidush* or *Khilul Hashem*, that they, by their identity as Jews, are wearing the 'uniform' of God's kingdom.

Within Judaism, however, different types of law, traditions and *Mitzvot* serve different functions. Some are focussed on pleasing God and nurturing the Jew's relationship with God, some are inward looking about self renewal and others are more outward looking about the structure of community, serving one another and making the world as a whole a better place- helping the poor etc.... Different groups or "denominations" of Jews who adhere to Judaism can broadly be distinguished by having different emphases on different types of laws and the way they see our purpose on earth and how they understand the character of God.

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<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>13</sup> The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, ed. R. Dr. J H Hertz, (Soncino Press, London, 1938). Joseph Herman Hertz (1862-1946) was chief rabbi of the Great Britain and the British Empire.

<sup>14</sup> Baba Bathra 10a



Different emphases:

- The orthodox: God loves us but it is conditional on our actions. The emphasis here then is on the laws that relate to God and his relationship with man as they are trying to be right before God- rituals about kosher, and prayers then will be paramount.
- The reform: God loves us unconditionally. He cares about the rituals and their symbolic meaning but the details are not important, the emphasis in this view is on our relationship with the world around us and making it a better place, mitzvot that involve human relations then are dominant.
- The conservatives: we are in partnership with God, we listen to Him and He to us. His will changes as we live and make decisions and our path changes, ritual then is more flexible, able to mould around us and our needs and can change with the times.

## Transformation

### VODUN

*Transformation takes place within the ritual.* Maya Deren argues that the primary effect of the ritual action is on the doer. The action reaffirms principles – destiny, strength, love, life, death; it recapitulates a man's relationships to his ancestors, his history, as well as his relationship to the contemporary community; it exercises and formalizes his own integrity and personality, tightens his disciplines, confirms his morale. In sum he emerges with a strengthened and refreshed sense of his relationship to cosmic, social and personal elements. A man so integrated is likely to function more effectively than one whose adjustment has begun to disintegrate, and this will be reflected in the relative success of his undertakings. The miracle is, in a sense interior. It is the doer who is changed by the ritual, and for him, therefore, the world changes accordingly. In the final analysis, what is important is not only what the serviteur does (which might conceivably be the right thing for the wrong reasons), nor what he consciously understands (which would vary according to his intellectual capacity) but what he has become as a result of his participation in those ceremonials.

*Music and dance are important.* Dance is an integral part of Vodou, inseparable from the songs and the drum rhythms, through which the loa are honoured and their presence invoked. Dance here functions as a ritual act, which enables communication with and influence of the supernatural worlds, leading to possessions through the loa, the ultimate goal of most ceremonies. With the drum rhythm depending on the song and the dance depending on the drum rhythm continuously over hours, we may say Vodou is to a great extent a sung and danced religion. Western Christianity with its cultural inheritance of mind-body dualism stretching back to Descartes, suggests a mind-body distinction that associates mind with truth, purity, a higher form of knowledge and the body with impurity and lower status. However, if we can imagine that the body is as sophisticated a communicative tool as the mind, then the centrality of music and dance in the enacting of Vodun ritual takes on a different perspective. Rather than the pursuit of ultimate truth in the sense of moral right and wrong, using analytical tools which are primarily a product of enlightenment thinking, Vodun is focused primarily on the importance of ritual and the correct participation in the ritual.



“Music and dance are so closely woven into the cults that one could almost speak of ‘danced religions’. Dance is itself linked with Divine possession – the normal mechanism by which a divinity communicates with the faithful.” (Metraux, 1959, 29)

*The rituals of embodiment or possession are significant.* “Once the loa are established, it is they who are dancing and no longer the worshipper. The dancing loa: movements are individual symbolic representations and their dancing often shifts to ‘acting’, i.e. they will behave or act in their specific manner, giving advice, joking, demanding the fulfilment of certain obligations etc. (Schmiderer, 98)

## JUDAISM

*Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).* Rosh Hashanah is not like the Western notion of New Year. It is seen as a time of renewal, and re-creation of self. This renewal, however, comes through a time of quiet and often solemn reflection, where one looks back over the past year and brings before God its joys and sorrows, things we have done right and our mistakes. It is seen as a time where God will judge us on how we have acted during the year and mark out our fate for the following year. This renewal and judgement come through many liturgies and set prayers, which focus on putting things right and repenting to start afresh as a new self. It is a time not only of reconciliation with God through prayer, readings and reflection, but it is also a time of reconciliation with others, a time where things need to be put right with our fellow human beings and as can be often found in the Jewish faith, it offers opportunities for taking action in the community and the world around us. In the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah many Jews will visit those with whom there has been a grievance of some kind and ask for forgiveness and put that relationship right. Many will pay off all their debts at this time so that there is nothing left outstanding between them and a fellow human. Renewal and transformation here then, come not from any lightening or emotional based experience of God, not through hype, but through quiet reflection, recitation of set prayers, which lead to repentance and practical hands on renewal of relationships with the community. Again here we can see that faith is not merely a personal feeling or connection with God and is certainly not based on emotions, though such times in the Jewish calendar are extremely emotional and they are a very passionate people in general, nor is it acceptance of a certain set of doctrines, but faith is about a practical way of life as a community.

The other most significant moment of transformation in the Jewish calendar is of course Yom Kippur- the Day of Atonement. This is a time of abstention, which again leads to repentance, forgiveness of sins and renewal. I see this day as being a small picture of Christian baptism, or perhaps I could say that I see Christian baptism as the ‘once-and-for-all’ fulfilment of this day. After fasting, Jews will walk quietly to the synagogue where the men at least would dress themselves in a white robe. This robe is two-fold in meaning; first it is a symbol of purity and being made new, coming to God as a fresh clean page, a new creation. The second Image is that of death, for this robe mirrors the white shroud in which Jews are wrapped and buried at death. I find this a very powerful symbol when thinking about Christian baptism in which we die and are reborn with Christ to begin our eternal life from here on earth as new, transformed characters. The atonement and renewal that occurs at Yom Kippur comes again through actions and ritual. The ritual clothes and liturgy





cause the Jew to look inward at himself, assess his life, the prayers bring reconciliation with God, and fasting links them to humanity and calls them to acts of charity. One Rabbi once gave a wonderful description of the reasons for the 5 types of fasting that take place at Yom Kippur:

*“We refrain from food and drink to teach us sympathy with the hungry. We abstain from sex and thus learn sensitivity to those who have no families. We wear no leather shoes and so identify with the poor who are unshod. We do not anoint our bodies with oil or lotions to better understand those deprived of luxury all year long.”<sup>15</sup>*

*Israel.* It would be difficult to talk about modern Judaism or Jewishness and not refer to the establishment of the State of Israel. The concept of this State brings together the three ideas of Truth, Transformation and Tradition. In recent years it has become a place of pilgrimage, a part of living out Jewishness would be to visit the State. The government are doing all they can to encourage young Jews to visit Israel at least once in their lifetime, but preferably to choose it as their place of settlement. After centuries of oppression, Israel was seen as reclaiming something- not only the physical land but also identity, pride, nationalism, recognition, it was a way of saying to the world ‘we will not be walked over any more’- to many Jews now it represents the epitome of what it is to be Jewish- a place where life can be lived out in Jewish community, it can form a picture of the way life should be lived. This is why Israel is not only a statement of nationalism but also an outworking of socialist dreams, which spring from the heart of Judaism. The concepts of dignity and humiliation are very important within Judaism, the way poverty is dealt with within Judaism always recognises the humiliation and degradation that poverty can bring and the struggle against poverty is as much about this, or more so, than it is about serving the physical needs of the individual. Israel was founded on the socialist ideal of a fair society in which every individual has all they need and which restores the dignity of the Jewish people themselves after years of subjugation and humiliation. The Kibbutz is a picture of this type of society, in which people live as one community, to the extent that the group as a whole bring up all the children collectively rather than the parents specifically, and in which all finances are pooled and shared out equally according to need. This very practice covers any shame that an individual who earns less may feel and protects the whole community from want and vulnerability. This was the strivings of many in the establishment of Israel, to create a place where charity and welfare and total shalom would be lived out as a natural part of society through the outworking of faith, which is most vividly expressed of course through deeds. These welfare communities had been and still are carried out by Jews all throughout the Diaspora. Maimonides, a famous Jewish philosopher notes:

*“All Jews and those attached to them are like brothers, as it is said, ‘You are the children of the Lord your God’- and if a brother will not show mercy on his brother, then who else will have mercy on him? And to whom can the poor of Israel look for help? To those nations who hate and persecute them? They can look for help only to their brethren.”<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Norman Lamm in a sermon at Yom Kippur

<sup>16</sup> Moses Maimonides: Mishneh Torah, Matenot Ani'im 10.2



One well-known Jewish writer expressed the ideal shape of a nation and the bases of tzedakah (which encompasses the ideas of charity and justice) as follows:

“Greatness, even for God, certainly for us, is not to be above people but to be with them, hearing their silent cry, sharing their distress, bringing comfort to the distressed and dignity to the deprived. The message of the Hebrew Bible is that civilisations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by how they care for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. What renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable.”<sup>17</sup>

Whether or not this is actually the picture we see when we look at the State of Israel is certainly debatable, and I would hazard to assert that most citizens of Israel would not consider the nation to be, as the quote suggests, ‘invulnerable’, but the message that we see here of something at the heart of Judaism is quite beautiful.

### **What can Christians learn from these two ways of approaching the Divine?**

Finally, we turn our attention back to Christianity and ask, what could Christianity learn from both Judaism and Vodun?

- The deep importance of community participation – the emphasis on a common spiritual life and the normalizing of spiritual practice in everyday life
- The total immersion and embodiment in the ritual
- Experiential truth rather than doctrinal truth – seeing the world anew – shift Christian focus away from denominational divisions to a focus on the spirit of God.
- Set apart/different – Christians maybe lack courage to be different
- A focus on the here and now – not the afterlife – this throws open the question of the kingdom of God – where is the kingdom? On earth or in heaven? Where is heaven?

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* 2005 pg. 37

