

Participation in conferences

Australasian Philosophy of Religion Association, Sydney

On 16 July, 2009 the Director of the Institute for Judaism and Civilization, Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen, presented a paper at the Australasian Philosophy of Religion Association (APRA) Conference in Sydney on the interface of Judaism and western philosophy. This essay has been published as "Torah and philosophy" in the latest volume of the *Journal of Judaism and Civilization* (Volume 8). An interesting and significant personal theme found amongst participants at this conference, who were generally academic philosophers of religion, was the tension between the constraints of the academic and philosophical study of religion and personal religious belief. Over and over again, one found participants, who themselves were drawn to (or niggled by) belief in a transcendent Creator, Whose nature was not something that could be rationally grasped, committed themselves to straight-jacketed concepts with which reason could cope - but which trivialized or falsified essential religious belief. This is the frontier between religion and philosophy, which few could easily cross, but which have left many participants with evident feels of deep personal ambivalence.

"Religious and Cultural Freedom under a Bill of Rights", Canberra

A conference on "Religious and cultural freedom under a bill of rights" was held in the Old Parliament House on 13-15 August to consider the impact which a bill of rights might have on religious freedom in Australia. Here the Director presented a paper on "Values and Democracy", which viewed the prospect of a bill of rights, especially in the present social and political climate, as a potential for carrying forward a culture war by defining human rights in the light of contemporary secularistic and hedonistic materialism. Most of the essay is concerned to delineate systematic features of this modern materialistic world view, and to make the point that there needs to be a public facing of first principles, principally as a choice between those anchored in the world religions (specifically their common root, the Noahide laws) and that of contemporary materialism.

New course on principles of religious thought

The Institute for Judaism and civilization is due to begin a new course in the basic principles of religious thought, underlying the Noahide thought. These relate to the existence and unity of the Creator, Revelation and Providence. It employs a Chassidic (mystical) interpretation of the "Thirteen Principles of faith" set out by the great medieval philosopher, Moses Maimonides. The course text is a work published by the Institute, Maimonides Principles. The course can be taken both in Melbourne and online interactively. The course runs from October 16 to December 4, 2009. Applications close 25 September. For details, cost and registration see: <http://www.ijc.com.au/courses.html>



Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen and Dr Rachael Kohn, coordinator of the ABC radio program "The Spirit of Things" both of whom spoke at the Conference on "Religious and cultural freedom under a Bill of Rights", held in Canberra on 13-14 August of this year. Photo: Phil Baker.

Seminar: "Judaism and geo-centrism"

On Wednesday September 23 at 8 pm, the Institute will host a seminar on "Judaism and Geo-Centrism [the cosmological view of the earth as centre of the Universe]" with Professor Avraham Hasofer, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics (University of New South Wales). The seminar is to be held in the "Caulfield Cup" Room on the Glen Eira City Hall, (corner Glen Eira and Hawthorn Roads, Caulfield). At a time when secular scientific cosmologies such as those of Darwinism are being called into question, it is also timely to examine the scientific and philosophical status of the Geo-centric model of the Universe as set out in the work of Maimonides, and its relationship to the teachings of Judaism (and indeed of universal religious principles). Entry \$10/\$5 concession.

ESSAY

An implicit challenge to male circumcision

By Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen

The Tasmania Law Reform Institute has called for submissions on law reform relating to the performance of circumcision not for medical ("therapeutic") reasons. At once this is of interest and concern to religious groups which practice circumcision. Whilst the "Options" with which the "Issues Paper" concludes indicate a reserve in suggesting any criminalization of circumcision of this kind, the bulk of the paper intimates a number of concerns which have furnished the animus for the paper in the first place. These concerns have to be addressed since they cohere with a particular cultural world view which could actually threaten the religious practice of circumcision. For - it must be asked - why and how did this question come up *now*, when circumcision has been practiced by Jews (and other cultures) worldover for thousands of years? (continued overleaf)

Alongside the banning of female genital mutilation

Tasmania has banned female “circumcision” or female genital mutilation. Noahide (universal religious law) law has no problem with this ban. There is no reason, and indeed it is a profound injustice, that woman through this operation, should be denied sexual pleasure in conjugal relations. There is, however, a concern that the reduced (though not removed) sexual pleasure affordable to a male through circumcision, which the Paper documents and classifies as a “loss” should eventually be grounds for lumping non-therapeutic male circumcision with female circumcision on the grounds that both (in differing degrees) diminish sexual pleasure.

Interestingly, in the discussion of Rabbi Akiva with the Roman tyrant Tinnus Rufus, the concept of circumcision is presented as the archetypal “rectification” or completion of the male. All the above does not mean that Torah mandates circumcision for all humanity. It is an integral covenant of the Jewish people with G-d; those of the nations who wish to perform it may do so, whilst the practice of circumcision in Islam also has compelling biblical reasons. At all events one must here anticipate and answer the argument that non-therapeutic male circumcision constitutes an unwarranted removal of a right to unrestricted sexual pleasure. For this would constitute an attack on an essential principle of Judaism and upon those, mentioned above, for whom circumcision is or has (by adoption) become mandatory.

The concept of the “rights” of a child

The question is raised in the background “Issues Paper” whether or not a child can consent to a physical change being made to his body. The question in fact goes deeper than this: to whom does the body belong? The standpoint of Judaism and much universal religious principle is that body and soul are not

the property of a person to do whatever he or she wants with them: to commit suicide, to request an “assisted suicide”, or euthanasia. The same question arises with abortion: according to universal religious principles, the unborn baby is not property of its mother (or parents) to dispose of. The permission for abortion, under Noahide law is in conditions of danger to the mother’s life. Then the rule of self-defence against a “pursuer” applies, and the baby may be destroyed. Otherwise, the healthy person may not agree to harm to his or her body for no constructive, good purpose. In the words of the Jewish liturgy, the soul is Yours (G-d’s) and the body is Yours (G-d’s), both of which G-d hands over to the person, within the parameters of Divine permission and Divinely mandated morality.

The corollary of Divine ownership of the body is that it may and should be given over to whatever alteration is Divinely required of it. So it is with the Jewish newborn baby. Just as the parents bear a child, who becomes Jewish by virtue of a Jewish mother (at least), a fact which no secular court can alter or modify, so also the father (and in his absence the Jewish community) is bidden to circumcise that child at eight days (health permitting) as part of the child’s integral Jewishness.

The notion of the “autonomy” of the child – such as to require a “moratorium” on all religious obligations (including circumcision) until the child comes of an age of autonomous decision-making – can also shade into an interference the religious parental obligation to educate the child in an integral religious worldview. Both are concepts of formation – whether physical or moral and character building – and the argument that one is reversible and the other is not, have nothing to do from the standpoint of the *Divine mandate* upon a Jewish parent both to form the child physically and spiritually. Indeed the power of formation of a child through

an early religious education could be argued to have a much deeper and pervasive effect than the physical formation of circumcision. If the law is “uncertain” about the right of a parent to circumcise his or her infant son, then the law should make it certain.

Pain

Pain is something that universal religious principle certainly wants to minimize if not eliminate, and it is evident that a neo-natal infant will suffer less immediate and enduring pain through circumcision than an older child or an adult. The report also compares circumcision to surgery, where there is an evident benefit. The “Issues Paper” suggest that circumcision could be considered “both an assault and wounding”. How is this different from piercing a young girl’s ears for earrings? The insistence that benefit be measured *only* on a physical scale (therapeutic) to justify pain (only physical benefit can warrant physical pain, as in surgery) negates the validity of the spiritual dimensions. For the Jewish people, the two aspects of circumcision go together. The physical self-restraint worked by male circumcision helps to expose the Jewish soul and its spiritual conscience.

Religion, rights and resonance

In the name of (inauthentic) “religion”, abuses can be carried out. The authentic claims of religion are those which have been borne out through tradition proceeding from revelation, confirmed by human experience over thousands of years, a reiterated and enduring resonance. That in 2009 an implicit or explicit challenge to the entitlement and mandate of Jews (and Muslims and others) to circumcise their children is historically a- resonant.

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