

# Comments on Joshua L. Golding for *APJ* online symposium

Matthew A. Benton

Oxford

Joshua L. Golding<sup>1</sup> presents a working definition of necessary and jointly-sufficient conditions for being a ‘traditional religious Jew,’ and defends such conditions as being rationally met, or rationally defensible, for some individuals. Such conditions include how one conceives of God, the good relationship with God, and its value; whether one believes that God’s existence, and God’s having given the Torah to the Jewish people (and its application to them throughout their generations), are at least ‘live’ possibilities; and whether one pursues the attainment or maintenance of the good relationship with God by keeping the Torah. There is much of interest in his well-argued essay, but I will limit myself to three critical points.

First, regarding Golding’s working definition of a traditional religious Jew. He summarises it thus:

A person is a ‘traditional religious Jew’ if and only if he meets all of these conditions:

(1a) He conceives of God as the Supreme Person.

(1b) He believes that there is (at least) a live possibility that such a God exists.

(2a) He conceives of the good relationship with God as one in which he is (or would be) a member of a communal rela-

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<sup>1</sup>“On the Rational Defensibility of Being a Traditional Religious Jew,” *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), 391–423.

tionship of mutual recognition, love and bonding (*deveikut*) between God and the Jewish people.

(2b) He conceives of that relationship as having supreme worth or value.

(3a) He conceives of the Torah as the way God has given for the Jewish people to attain or maintain such a relationship with God.

(3b) He believes that there is (at least) a live possibility that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and that it applies to Jews throughout their generations.

(4) He pursues the attainment or maintenance of that relationship with God by keeping the Torah. (1999, 404)

I will be mainly concerned here with the consequences of Golding's view of 'conceiving', and of believing that there is (at least) a 'live possibility' of something's being true.

Each of (1)–(3) include a clause about how the subject conceives of something. Golding defines this notion thus: "To have a conception of something is to regard that something as a 'theoretical possibility'," where for it to be *rational* for some person to regard some conception as a theoretical possibility, the given concept must merely be both (i) internally or logically coherent, and (ii) "externally coherent," that is, it '*coheres with other related concepts held by the same person*' (405). Of this second condition, he says "a person can fail to hold a conception rationally... if that person also holds some other related conception which logically conflicts with the first conception" (406). Golding then goes on to give conditions for believing that some proposition is at least a *live possibility*, namely, "to believe there is a *live possibility* that *p* is to *not* be totally convinced that *p* is false, and to be disposed, at least under some hypothetical circumstances,

to take  $p$  into account when deciding how to act”; and such a belief is rationally defensible when (stated simply): “as long as I have some reason to think  $p$  is true, and no definitive proof that  $p$  is false, then it is rationally defensible for me to believe there is a live possibility that  $p$ ” (407).

The first worry I have about this is that because Golding has not explained what it is for one to ‘hold a concept’, it is unclear whether, given his rational coherence conditions (i) and (ii) for theoretical possibilities, my holding some concepts gets in the way of me rationally holding other concepts. For example, a theist might, along with clause (1a) above, conceive of God as the Supreme Person, because she regards it (rationally, let’s say) as a theoretical possibility; and suppose, along with (1b), that this theist gives high credence to such a God’s existence, thereby believing it to be a live possibility. But this same theist might plausibly regard it as *theoretically possible* that God is not a Supreme Person (and is instead, perhaps, just the ‘Ground of all being’ in Tillich’s phrase); so her non-Personhood theoretical possibility is a conception which conflicts with her Personhood conception of God. But given Golding’s external coherence condition (ii), it looks like our theist cannot be rational in holding both these even as theoretical possibilities. Yet these are only supposed to be theoretical possibilities; our theist isn’t fully committed to both being *true*, she merely ‘has a conception’ of each, with high credence in one, even though she regards the alternative as theoretically possible. Shouldn’t this combination of attitudes be rational?

Second, note that on his account of rationally regarding some propositions as live possibilities, it should be possible, for some propositions, for one rationally to regard both  $p$  and not- $p$  as live possibilities (and this seems intuitive). One could believe that some  $p$  is a *live* possibility (because one has some reason to think it true, and lacks definitive proof that it’s false), while regarding not- $p$  as a *theoretical* possibility; indeed, I think many theists (and many agnostics) take just this view where  $p$  is a *personal*

*God exists*. But given Golding's gloss (ii) on external coherence (absent a precise account of what it is to 'hold a conception of'), this combination is deemed irrational if one also regards not- $p$  as theoretically possible. (It is a bad result if even an agnostic about  $p$ , who refrains from full commitment either way on  $p$ , counts as irrational merely by entertaining as theoretically possible the alternative not- $p$ !)

Third, I wonder about whether this framework of conceiving and believing propositions to be live possibilities makes it too easy for those who do not self-identify as such, to count as 'traditional religious Jews.' Take a Christian who holds in very high regard both the written and oral Torah, and thinks them largely compatible with the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament (under certain interpretations of each). This person, let us stipulate, meets conditions (1a, b) and (3a, b). Let us also suppose that this person would like to convert to Judaism because this would enable him to participate the good relationship with God and the Jewish community (2a), which he conceives of as having supreme worth and would permit him to experience God most fully (2b). But he cannot bring himself to do so (perhaps because he cannot relinquish some of his core Christian convictions, which would make joining the Jewish community difficult; or because he assumes that because he was not born Jewish, he cannot fully become Jewish even by conversion; or for some other reason). Arguably such a person fulfills (2a): he conceives the good, indeed the best, relationship with God as one in which he *would be* a member of a communal relationship of mutual recognition, love, and bonding between God and the Jewish people. Instead of full converting then, he strives to be a Christian who keeps the Torah (if this is possible); indeed, this person might decide to adopt this lifestyle on decision-theoretic grounds such as those adverted to by Golding (1999, 416–420), because he thinks it a live possibility that he may be able to enter into the good relationship with God and the Jewish community by doing to; he arguably thereby fulfils (4). Thus

on Golding's conditions (1)–(4), such a person plausibly counts as a traditional religious Jew, even though he has not even converted to Judaism.