

Responses for APJ Symposium on *The Rational Defensibility of Being a Traditional Religious Jew*

I wish to thank the APJ for this opportunity to respond to some thoughtful criticisms of my article published back in 1999. My book, published in 2003, entitled *Rationality and Religious Theism*, is a more developed version of that article, and I encourage anyone who found the article interesting to peruse the book. However, in these responses I shall attempt to defend the article on its own terms.

Response to Matthew Benton

In my paper, I propose that in an order for someone to possess a conception rationally, it must be internally coherent, and also *externally coherent with related notions that the person has*. Benton's first two points involve an apparent problem with my notion of 'external coherence.' He rightly points out that a given person may have a number of different ideas of God in his mind, which are not coherent with one another, but all of which are deemed by that person to be internally coherent. It is also quite plausible for someone to believe there is a live possibility that God on some conception exists, and yet also that there is a live possibility that an alternative, completely different kind of God exists, or that there is no God at all. Yet given my requirement of 'external coherence' it seems that any concept of God would have to be ruled out as irrational since there is bound to be some alternative conception (that the person might have) which he regards as internally coherent. It also seems that I have committed myself to the absurd position that it is irrational to regard two incompatible propositions (e.g. *God exists* and *God does not exist*) as live possibilities. Benton suggests that I need to spell out better what I mean by 'having a conception', for it seems like a richer notion than merely thinking that something is a theoretical possibility. While Benton may be right about this, another way I can respond is to articulate better what I meant by the phrase "related notions" (in the italicized phrase above). A related notion is *not* an alternative notion, but rather one that is *integrally related* to the person's concept of God.

What I meant is best understood by means of the following example: if a person conceives of God as unchanging and yet as changing, that would obviously be internally incoherent. However, suppose a person conceives of God as unchanging, and yet he conceives of the good relationship with God as one which consists in mutual love between man and God. Suppose further that this person thinks of love as an emotion, and he thinks that in order to have an emotion requires a being must be subject to change. In this case, the person's concept of God itself is internally incoherent, but it does not fit with his concept of the good relationship with God. Therefore it is 'externally incoherent'.

Someone might quibble with this and say that this counts as an internal incoherence after all, because if this person really conceives of the good relationship with God as involving love, then that means he must think of God as loving being, and so this directly conflicts with his concept of God as unchanging. If so, what I am calling 'external incoherence' simply reduces to 'internal coherence' after all. I can concede this point, and say that for those who wish to view things in that way, the only criterion to judge a given person's conceptions as 'rationally defensible' is whether they are internally coherent. In any event, this will not have any material impact on the main argument of the paper.

Regarding Benton's third point, I think it is simply a mistake to say that a person who is not Jewish by birth and who fails to convert (for whatever reason) could turn out to qualify as a religious Jew on my conception. Benton's example of a person who does everything a Jew does but fails to convert is actually an example of someone who does *not* "keep the Torah" and so fails to fulfill condition 4. This is a theological or "sacral" point of Jewish law. In fact, according to the Torah, there are certain commandments that a non-Jew is actually *forbidden* to keep, such as participating in the Paschal service, and according to Rabbinic teaching, observing the Sabbath. The bottom line is that a person cannot fully "keep the Torah" unless he is a member of the Jewish people either by birth or conversion. Hence Benton's proposed counterexample fails to fulfill condition 4.

Response to Silvia Jonas

Jonas' first point concerns the notion of *qualitative superiority*. I wholly agree with Jonas that for the notion of *qualitative superiority* to be useful, it must be the case that in order for x to be qualitatively superior to y, it must be intelligible to say that x and y are *comparable*, and it must also be intelligible to say that x is 'better' than y. I agree that if someone thinks that a certain relationship with God is qualitatively superior to let's say, having a lot of fun watching football, then, it must be the case that a) one can compare the two in terms of their goodness and also that b) it is intelligible to say that the one is 'better' than the other. I do not claim that the relationship with God is *incomparable* with other goods; on the contrary, I claim that it is comparable, but that it is plausible to think that it is radically better than other goods. Jonas' criticism here seems to rest on a mistake. Just because one conceives of a good as qualitatively better than another does *not* commit one to saying that the two are incomparable.

The second point concerns a distinction I make between 'belief' and 'rational commitment to a belief'. In passing I state that a person might be rationally committed to a certain belief, but actually fail to have that belief. I think that this is entirely possible. In this instance, the person would be engaged in some form of irrationality. Jonas thinks that if a person is committed to a belief he must actually believe it in some way. I disagree, but if I am wrong about this it does not undermine the main argument of my paper. It might only make it all the more easy to argue that it is rationally defensible to be a religious Jew.

Secondly, I do not claim that *any* person who engages in some Jewish religious observances or even in many of them is committed to a belief in God. This seems to be what Jonas has in mind with the case of Yankel, who "leads an observant life" out of social pressure or laziness even though he has no belief in God. However, this Yankel does not qualify as a religious Jew *in my sense of the term*, for he is not "engaged in the pursuit of a good relationship with God" via the practice of Jewish religious observances. I stick by my claim that someone who 'engages in the pursuit of a good relationship with God' is committed to belief in God.

Third, I claim that a person is committed to the logical consequences of his beliefs. Jonas suggests that this is a bold claim, but I hold fast to it. Jonas asks a few questions about this. I would say that indeed if a

person believes in a contradiction, then, since any contradiction formally implies all truths, indeed he is committed to all truths; if a person believes in any proposition, he is committed to all necessary truths (we all are so committed!). I don't see what is so "bold" about these positions; remember that I also hold that just because a person is committed to a proposition, does not entail that he actually believes it. Finally, Jonas makes the claim that if God exists, his existence is implied by everything; and so, someone who believes in God must somehow believe that everyone should believe in God. I simply don't get this point because I don't understand what Jonas means by the claim that God's existence is "implied by everything." Even if God exists, I don't think that God's existence follows logically from the existence of everything!

Fourth, Jonas raises concerns regarding my use of the concepts of rationally compelling and rationally defensible. It seems to me that I can concede that perhaps no proposition is truly rationally compelling, that is, rationally demonstrable for all rational people at all times. However it is simply a mistake to say "if hardly anything is rationally compelling in Golding's sense, then almost *everything* is rationally defensible in Golding's sense." This does not follow at all. I do say and I still say that if some proposition is rationally compelling, this implies that its opposite or negation is not rationally defensible for anyone. But nothing I say implies that if nothing is rationally compelling, anything is rationally defensible. For something to be rationally defensible, an argument of some sort must be marshaled in its favor.

Sixth, Jonas seems to think that my sense of "rationally defensible" is too lax; that it permits so much that it is almost a useless concept. I'm not sure why. One of Jonas' points is that on my usage of these terms, two persons can hold mutually exclusive beliefs (they cannot both be true) while ascribing a "live possibility" to both of them. It seems "too easy" according to Jonas to call a belief rationally defensible and assign it the probability of a live possibility. I'm not sure what the complaint is here. This seems to me a complaint about the human condition, not about my usage of terms. The fact is that in order to believe that some proposition has a live possibility scant evidence is needed. Now, I do not insist that for any proposition that has scant evidence, everyone *must* or rationally *ought* to believe that this proposition has a live possibility. However, it seems to me entirely plausible that if there is scant evidence for some proposition, a person is entitled to believe that there is a live possibility that the proposition is true. If Jonas accuses my position of laxity I could just as equally accuse Jonas' position as unduly restrictive.

Jonas expresses the concern that on my view rational defensibility is an 'insular matter' where "the rational standards of a certain group suffice to make a belief rationally defensible for members of that group." This is not an accurate portrayal of my view. The *standards* for what makes something rational do not vary from person to person or from culture to culture. However, given the same basic set of rational standards, it is possible that, given certain initial conditions, what is rationally defensible for one person might not be rationally defensible for another. It is not a good objection to this view simply to assert that this is 'insular' or 'lax'. Such an objection is simply question-begging.

Finally, I claim that a plausible account of religious pluralism falls out as a (nice) consequence of my approach to the rational defensibility of Jewish religious commitment. It seems Jonas thinks my strategy

involves some kind of ‘relativization’ of rationality or ‘relativism about truth’. But I am certainly not a relativist ‘about truth’ and nothing in my article implies a relativistic view about truth. This objection is entirely off the mark. Now, I do claim that different positions can be rationally defensible for different persons, insofar as different people have different conceptions of God, different background beliefs about what is good or bad, different ways of thinking about the ultimate, and different beliefs about whether there is a live possibility regarding God and about the way to relate to God. This seems to me to an eminently reasonable position to be in. I don’t know what is ‘self-stultifying’ about such a position.

Perhaps it behooves to emphasize that on my view, there are still a lot of people out there who are engaged in a form of religious commitment that is NOT rationally defensible, or that cannot be articulated as such. It is not my project to go about bashing other religious ways or conceptions, but in theory this certainly could be done. One should not come away with the impression (as Jonas seems to suggest) that on my view, any religious way could theoretically be rationally defensible for anyone.

Response to Shira Weiss

Weiss correctly notes that there are many ways of conceiving of what it means to be a traditional religious Jew. Some may involve theology and some may not, some may emphasize practice and some may emphasize belief. All I have attempted to do in my papers is propose *one* way of conceiving of what is involved in being a traditional religious Jew, and then to argue that it is rationally defensible, at least for some persons, to be ‘traditional religious Jews’ on *that* conception. I think my conception of what it is to be a religious Jew is quite a plausible and ‘legitimate’ conception that covers many real live Jews, but I do not pretend that it is the only possible way to articulate that notion. I am quite happy to admit that there are many people who may pass as “religious Jews” under some *other* conception, and that the positions of such people may very well *not* be rationally defensible. For example, if a person is religious only out of filial piety or tribal loyalty, they may perhaps not be engaged in a practice that is rationally defensible, at least not on the grounds that I offer in my paper. I do not see this as a weakness in my view, but rather as a desirable outcome.

Weiss raises the question of whether one *must* think of God as benevolent, compassionate, holy, righteous, etc. in order to count as a religious Jew. I would venture to say that if a person does not conceive of God as supremely benevolent, compassionate, holy and righteous **in some sense**, he or she is beyond the pale of traditional religious Judaism. A completely uniform conception is not necessary, but there are some basics that are necessary. Giving up supreme benevolence is giving up a core aspect of traditional Judaism – whether one comes to this position as a result of the problem of evil, or as a result of something else. However, a proper understanding what benevolence really amounts to is another thing completely. Indeed, as Weiss rightly notes, I believe that there may be many different ways of understanding God’s qualities in detail. It is not the task of my paper to flesh out these details.

As an example, Weiss claims that Maimonides denies compassion to God, and that God has no attributes whatsoever. In my opinion, it is a grave mistake to state without qualification that “Maimonides denies that God has compassion” or that “Maimonides denies that God has attributes.” Rather, Maimonides understands all positive attributes regarding God as *attributes of action* rather than

as *essential attributes*. I stick to my view that someone who *absolutely rejects* a “God of compassion” does not qualify as a traditional religious Jew. Maimonides may have had a unique way of understanding what it means to believe in God’s personhood and compassion, but it is a grave mistake to say flatly that he rejects this notion. (And if he had, I would have no hesitation saying that he was not a traditional religious Jew.)

Finally, Weiss brings up the view that some philosophers have articulated that religious commitment need not have an argument to support it. But nothing I say in the paper rules out the possibility that religious commitment either doesn’t need a vindication or is somehow above vindication. That may or may not be an intellectually respectable position to take. Nothing in my paper rules out the possibility that religious belief could be legitimate in some way even if no rationale can be given, or that its legitimacy is beyond rationality (if that makes any sense). However, I beg to point out that Weiss’s quotes from William James and Dr. Shatz are a lot closer to my approach than Weiss seems to think. William James in effect gave a pragmatic defense of religious commitment, and the quote from Dr. Shatz is also rather telling. On the one hand Shatz denies that reason vindicates his religious commitment; on the other hand, at least in the quote provided, he goes on to give what sounds like pragmatic reasons for his commitment (granted, it is not the same argument that I have proposed). And as Weiss herself notes, the argument I give should be judged on its merits, and not dismissed out of hand on the grounds that it cannot succeed because one assumes *a priori* that arguments in favor of religious commitment are doomed to failure.

In closing, I believe that the project of offering a rationale for religious commitment is a worthy project. I think the rationale I offer is *latent* in traditional Judaism. Traditional Jewish sources insist that Judaic commitment is wise. For example, Mishlei or Proverbs is filled with this concept. While there are some anti-rational tendencies in traditional Jewish sources, there is also a great deal of emphasis on the wisdom and of religious commitment. The argument in my paper is a combined cognitive-pragmatic approach that in my opinion dovetails well with classic Jewish sources.