**HM4519 Global Religions – Shannon Kira Mcmillan**

**Considering the diversity that exists within each of the religions studied on this module, does it make any sense to talk about them as coherent wholes?**

Judaism is a widely diverse religion with many different traditions through theological disagreements ranging from Orthodox, Conservative, Messianic, Liberal, and Feminist Jews. These groups differ on issues such as the role of women, modesty, and Jewish converts creating intercommunity barriers mainly between the Orthodox Jewish tradition and the more liberal Jewish traditions. Jewish denominations have disputes over theology, religious practice, and tradition with those who follow the ‘fundamental principles of the Jewish faith’, while others such as Zacharias Frankel believed that ‘Judaism must be understood as a historically evolving dynamic religion’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Alongside these theological disputes there are geographical differences that were formed via the ‘cultural conditions’ Jewish people found themselves after their dispersal from Israel and beyond due to empires, conflict, and antisemitism.[[2]](#footnote-2) This diaspora expanded Judaism into multiple ethnic groups such as ‘Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi’ diversifying Jewish culture and developing distinct customs and traditions such as Yiddish and traditional dress common among Hasidim Jews.[[3]](#footnote-3) Globalisation of Judaism due to this migration, can be considered to have divided this religion and cannot be thought of as a coherent whole, however these division are diminished by Jewish drive to expand and maintain their community worldwide by ‘adjusting to environmental and cultural conditions.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Denominations of Judaism are united by their belief in Yahweh, following of the commandments, and maintaining Jewish tradition in an effort to conserve Jewish culture and religion. This strive for maintaining and expanding Judaism led to Conservative Jews’ commitment to maintaining ‘the Jewish tradition in its

historical continuity’ alongside being ‘spiritually vibrant by adjusting to environmental and cultural conditions’ agreeing with the leading United States Jewish thinkers’ belief that they ‘should combine elements of both traditional and non-traditional Judaism.’[[5]](#footnote-5) This willingness to mould Judaism around contemporary social and political climates is not shared by the strictly Orthodox traditions of Judaism, creating a modern Jewish community fragmentation and possibly conflict over these practices in a secularised society. While Modern Orthodox believers such as nineteenth century Rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, argued that ‘it is possible to remain an Orthodox Jew while being fully conversant with modern culture’, diversity exists within the Orthodox form of Judaism further dividing the religion into further categories.[[6]](#footnote-6) The categorisation of Judaism allow outsiders to gain some knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of the religion creating an image of a coherent whole with their shared history, origin, beliefs, and hardships. These divisions don’t affect many Jews as they don’t ‘identify with any one denomination, instead describing themselves as “nondenominational,” “transdenominational,” “post-denominational” or “just Jewish.”’[[7]](#footnote-7) Reinforcing the argument that it makes sense to consider Judaism as a coherent whole as it consists of multiple strict denominations, fluid denominations and non-denominational Jews by affiliation, belief, or heritage.

Jewish denominational traditions have disputes over social issues and traditions such as the role of women and girls within Jewish traditions and social expectations. Attitudes towards this social expectation differs in the denominations with strict orthodox Jewish ‘young women are expected to become revered mothers and homemakers’, while in modern orthodox Judaism ‘girls would expect to have their own professional careers’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Variations amongst the orthodox traditions demonstrate the diversity of Judaism alongside the differences between orthodox and “liberal” Jewish denominational thought. Jewish feminists such as Ezrat

Nashim beliefs that Judaism should now focus on ‘eliminating the subordination of women by equalising their rights in marriage and divorce… [and allowing] women to assume positions of leadership’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Another social issue within the Jewish community is consideration of modesty and traditional religious dress, with one of the more recognisable aspects of Judaism being the Hasidim ‘side curls’[[10]](#footnote-10) and black hats. This image of Jews may be what the outsider has seen to represent Jewish people, believing that this type of Jew to be representative of the whole community depending on prior knowledge. With this restricted view on Judaism and its culture, we cannot think of Judaism as a coherent whole due to the diversity within the Jewish community and the expansive culture worldwide that lacks real representation globally and to the non-Jewish population. These considerations suggests that Judaism cannot be considered as a coherent whole within a social context due to the range of differing standpoints on social norms with the role of women, modesty, and traditional dress. Although it makes sense to consider Judaism as a coherent whole theologically with its base reading and following of the Torah, ‘Mishnah’, ‘Pentateuch’, and other denominational and non-denominational scripture and writings for each Jewish movement that is still practice today and their shared belief in HaShem and G-d’s nature.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Jewish converts are a controversial aspect within the Jewish community as Jewish culture and religion are often intertwined with one another, as a non-believing Jew by geology is considered to be Jewish in Israel ‘regardless of affiliation; regardless of conversion status’, heritage, and cultural background.[[12]](#footnote-12) Orthodox and Conservative Jews require converts to undergo ‘mitzvat, mila and twilah… supervised by a Beit Din of

three people.’[[13]](#footnote-13) These requirements unite the Jewish community with them having to go through these procedures and kept at an overarching standard and involvement in Jewish traditions. Traditions,

procedures, and expectations placed upon these converts form Judaism into a coherent whole as the conversion process fully integrates them into the Jewish community, if accepted by the Orthodox denominations. This internal divide suggests that Judaism cannot be considered to be a coherent whole and is reflective of the historic separation with Josephus’ affirmation that ‘Jewish doctrine takes three forms…Pharisees… Sadducees… [and] Essenes.’[[14]](#footnote-14) This theory was disregarded with the rise of the ‘Fourth Philosophy’ in 6CE and Zealots who ‘invaded the Temple in Jerusalem’ in 68CE, however these Jewish movements ‘left no direct legacy in later forms of Judaism.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Which supports the idea of Judaism as a coherent whole as only the “popular”, or more notable forms of the religion still remains, narrowing down what Judaism is in contemporary contexts.

Since the first century, all Jewish people have had the ‘institution of the synagogue as a place for prayer as well as for teaching the law and reading the biblical texts to a congregation’, this use of the synagogue is still relevant in the contemporary organisation of Judaism as it houses G-d and is dedicated to Him, allowing appropriate places of worship for the followers of G-d.[[16]](#footnote-16) Interpretation of scripture and biblical injunctions has been disputed since it ‘spawned [in] the first century CE,’ these interpretations existed within temple and synagogue worship and extended into the contemporary.[[17]](#footnote-17) Creating continuity within Judaism and its beliefs therefore remaining a coherent whole throughout history, considering Judaism as a whole allows the outsider and students to gain a baseline knowledge of the religion. Differing in interpretation of scripture is reflected in all religions with different denominations such as Christianity, and

all Christians are considered to be within the coherent whole that is Christianity. Theological differences create separate sections of Judaism rather than a coherent whole due to each group’s distinctiveness form a diverse and complex network under the umbrella term Judaism. Using this umbrella term, it makes sense to talk about Judaism as a coherent whole instead of a ‘single homogenous group’ instead recognise the different sections of the religion that make up Judaism.[[18]](#footnote-18) Since the biblical period, Jews have been divided into tribes during the ‘Wilderness Wandering’ after escaping slavery in Egypt, forming different traditions and interpretations of scripture that unified in the ‘United Kingdom of Israel in 1079 BC.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Conquest created divides within the Jewish community and globalised their tradition via diasporic travel of the expelled and the migrating Jews from Israel.

Conflict and empires lead to the Jewish diaspora since ‘the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 [scattering them] all over the Middle East’,[[20]](#footnote-20) which led to development and diversity within the religion and forming of traditional and increased Judaism’s influence globally. These subgroups are all ‘thought to be descendants of Shem,’ sharing this heritage allows us to trace back their connections amongst the differences theologically and geographically shaping Judaism as historically to be a coherent whole.[[21]](#footnote-21) With Messianic Jews believing that ‘loyalty to the Jewish heritage [should be followed] as enshrined in Scripture’ reinforcing this sense of community and family within the Jewish community and connection to their homeland of Israel.[[22]](#footnote-22) From this diaspora, a sense of Zionism emerges from the palimpsest of global Judaism back to Israel that is shared by most, if not all Jews with pilgrimages to Jerusalem. These pilgrimages allow Jews to use their ‘faith to connect [their] own experiences to God’s experience… [and]

with the experiences of other Jewish people’ and allow them a return to the Jewish homeland.[[23]](#footnote-23) Israel’s Jewish population in the Kingdom of David was ‘approximately 5 million’ and then in 1099 after the ‘Crusaders conquer Israel and massacre its Jewish inhabitants’ Jewish presence in Israel was small to non-existent, with the Jewish population residing predominantly in ‘Asia, Africa & Turkey’[[24]](#footnote-24) with a growing population in Europe due to the ‘expulsion of about 10,000 Russian Jews, refuges of 1881-1884 pogroms, from Germany’ in 1885.[[25]](#footnote-25) Multiple conflicts have affected the Jewish community and tradition since its biblical origins with Moses and the Israelites escaping slavery during the ‘Bronze Era’, to the Holocaust, 1939-1945 with the global Jewish population declining from around 16.6 million in 1939 to around 10 million after the Shoah.[[26]](#footnote-26) These massacres, mass deaths and persecution has created a drive of survival of Jewish tradition and culture and to teach the younger generations, regardless of affiliation of their struggle and beliefs via festivals such as Passover. Judaism collectively celebrating these festivals and these events such as Shabbat, mean that these celebrations are considered to be “Jewish festivals” by the outsider and the insider supporting the argument that you can talk about Judaism as a coherent whole due to the shared history and celebration of that history.

Different ethnicities within the Jewish community globalises the tradition and diversifies Judaism creating a diverse coherent whole, which encapsulates Judaism as an ever changing and modernising religion to coexist with vernacular social political climates. Supporting Zacharias Frankel’s belief that Judaism is a ‘historically evolving dynamic religion’, as Jewish people throughout history have evolved and adapted

their religion from outside influence from other religious and social traditions globally.[[27]](#footnote-27) This evolution that Jewish tradition has undergone which led to its fragmentation and creation of denominations is a part of

the coherent whole that is the religion because in itself, Judaism is a malleable and historic tradition that can adapt to all aspects of life and stages within history, surviving through many hardships and threat of depletion. Judaism being a global religion may create a problem in thinking of the religion as a coherent whole due to its complexity and diversity with many different aspects and social conditions within cultural contexts. All denominations and cultures within Judaism follow ‘Jewish law (halakhah)’ Alongside basic theological beliefs, such as a belief in Yahweh and the Patriarchs.[[28]](#footnote-28) With modern Jewish beliefs having foundations in historical Judaism, such as ‘Medieval Jewish mysticism is based on earlier rabbinic speculation’ reinforcing the idea that Jewish tradition is an ever evolving and adaptive religion with early foundations that remain relevant in the contemporary world.[[29]](#footnote-29) A large percentage of the Jewish population still resides in Israel that integrates ‘communal and political life’, but the United States of America has a large Jewish population that has its ‘own institutions’.[[30]](#footnote-30) These two countries demonstrate the duality of Jewish tradition, with Israel having Jewish influence within the country’s politics while the United States are in a secular society with a large Jewish population with observance of their holidays without significant influence in its government and politics.

Overall Judaism can be talked about as a coherent whole as the fundamental beliefs of the religion are shared across all denominations with their shared theological beliefs, and geographical climates. However, these differences to an outsider may create an image of Judaism to be small distinct parts that cannot be

considered as a coherent whole because of the different traditions and practices across the Jewish world. Socially, Judaism could not be considered as a coherent whole due to its complexity amongst the different

denominations with some similarities. Geographically it makes sense to think of Judaism as a coherent whole due to their affiliation with Israel, shared heritage, and relation to Shem.

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