Soloveitchik, Joseph Dov
from Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Philosophers


Main publications:

• (1932) Das Reine Denken unddie Seinskonstituierung bei Hermann Cohen [Pure Thought and the Constituting of Being in Hermann Cohen], Reuther Reichard Berlin (based on PhD).
• (1944) Ish ha-Halakhah, Galui ve-Nistar [Halakhic Man, Revealed and Hidden], Orot Jerusalem (English translation, Halakhic Man, JPSA Philadelphia, 1983).

Secondary literature:

Soloveitchik’s philosophy is an attempt to reconcile his strict and systematic intellectual Talmudic upbringing with the fruits of his secular philosophical studies, in order to constitute his ideal prototype of the ‘halakhic man’. He sees the halakhah (Jewish Law) as an exact system, comparable to physics. *Halakhic Man* (1944) was the first attempt to adumbrate a specifically spiritual role for Jewish Law, by combining the intellectual and religious side of man in neo-Kantian fashion. In ‘The lonely man of faith’ (1965) Soloveitchik replaces neo-Kantianism with an existential model, positing two ‘Adams’, based on the two versions of the creation story in *Genesis* 1 and 2. ‘Majestic’ Adam is creative and assertive, wishing to dominate nature, whereas ‘covenantal’ Adam is passive and submissive. These two types reside within every Jew, and are both divinely sanctioned. This view impacts on environmental issues, as Soloveitchik finds divine sanction for humanity’s secular role in dominating and subduing the world. Soloveitchik also describes the existential ‘loneliness’ of the individual which can be assuaged only by the covenantal relationship with God. In apparent contrast to Buber, he advocates the relationship with God as the only way to relate to ones fellow, rather than the other way round.

In other works Soloveitchik discusses the idea of devekut (cleaving to God) through a combination of knowledge and love, as well as the philosophical link between the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. In his later work he describes three rather than two ‘Adams’, and appears undecided as to whether he prefers the intellectual-assertive or the religious-submissive type of behaviour.

Soloveitchik is regarded as the spiritual leader of modern Jewish Orthodoxy, especially in America. He advised on contemporary issues, such as the définition of a Jew for the purposes of emigration to, or marriage in, Israel, and the vexed status of women in Jewish Law. In most cases, and based largely on his unusual Kantian and existential approach to halakhah in decision-making, he tended to the side of liberalism, thereby becoming an unlikely ally of reformist elements within Orthodoxy and incurring the wrath of hard-liners. He valued the saving of lives alone the retention of land in the West Bank. However, he regarded inter-faith dialogue between Jews and Christians as ‘utterly absurd’, because he viewed the two religions as totally distinct entities. His view on Christianity has become the established view of all segments of Orthodox Judaism, although Soloveitchik has participated with Christian groups in the study of social problems which affect both communities. By lecturing for over four decades at Yeshiva University, a post in which he succeeded his father, and by remaining singularly modest and unassuming, Soloveitchik wielded tremendous intellectual and personal influence on American Jewish Orthodoxy, and on the wider world. He is regarded by many as the greatest Orthodox thinker of the century and opened up the philosophical study of Jewish Law and its implications for politics and sociology to much-needed debate.

**Sources:** EncJud; NUC; Schoeps, 1992; obituary, *The Times*, 21 Apr 1993.

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