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I am often asked what was it that attracted me, a Dutch Calvinist Protestant, to Judaism.[1] There were many motivations for my eventual conversion to Judaism, such as the desire to experience a spiritual connection (for which many if not all religions could qualify), a belief in one God (limiting my options to the monotheistic faiths), the Torah (narrowing it down to Judaism), and a religiously inspired and committed lifestyle that permeates life in all its different realms (which left me with Orthodoxy). But although I highly appreciated these values, there were and are other things that I value as well, among them: A communal striving for responsible and ethical conduct, a path of challenging and deepening studies, open-mindedness and respect for people with different mindsets and opinions, innovational out-of-the-box thinking, intellectual honesty, creativity, and aesthetics.

When someone first becomes interested in Judaism without knowing it from up close, the first image that often comes to mind is a romanticized Fiddler-on-the-Roof kind of religion. An image of old, kind men and wise rabbis dressed in black hats and long robes, men sporting beards, shuckling [2] while bending over a Talmud page. I believe that this image is so powerful that in the minds of many a

seeker the often subconscious conviction has been imprinted that (ultra)Orthodoxy is the only genuine kind of Judaism and anything more moderate, modern, or enlightened is a false spinoff from the real thing. I have seen more than a few converts readjust themselves to this image while donning black outfits and even adopting a pronunciation of Hebrew that reflects the influence of East-European Germanic and Slavic dialects. It is thus of no surprise that in some circles the term Modern Orthodoxy raises eyebrows. It sounds to them like an artificial adaptation of something ancient, like Mozart's music put to a synthesizer beat.

The issue of Jewish authenticity surely is an important one. To answer the question of which group, denomination, or community is most worthy for fitting the label of authentic Judaism, of course depends on one's subjective definitions and expectations. In my opinion, authentic Judaism is first and foremost traditional, meaning that it perpetuates ancient rituals and practices with serious dedication. This includes traditional ways to celebrate and sanctify the Sabbath and holidays, as well as prayer. In other words, my definition of authentic would exclude communities that practice these rituals only when it pleases them and give up on them when it becomes convenient. Keeping traditional rituals is perhaps the most powerful way to connect today's generation with its ancestral lineage throughout the ages, to connect our present with our past. And most likely it is also the most effective way to pass on that rich heritage to the next generation, connecting the past with the future. Being traditional also implies a careful application of the Jewish precepts as formulated by the Sages. This does not mean that Judaism cannot or does not evolve, but in order to remain authentic, it cannot bear too radical changes, purely based on the fashion of the day.

Authentic Judaism is also, in my opinion, cherishing and cultivating a connection with God as our Creator and the Instigator of the Jewish people and religion. This implies a central role for Torah, both in liturgy and lifestyle. This does not mean blindly proceeding in the trodden path of tradition and following our rules and rituals without a critical mind. On the contrary, being authentic means thinking analytically and identifying the possible effects of our conduct on families, society, and the world at large. Assuming that Judaism is meant to be an enriching, liberating, and wholesome influence in the world, then if our lifestyle, or any aspect of our practice would—God forbid— cause pain, suffering, or grief to others, then surely we have misinterpreted the precepts of our religion and should rethink them. For that reason alone, we need to train ourselves and each other in critical, independent thinking. The biggest chance for something to go

terribly wrong in a community or in a society is when its members do not notice a detrimental development soon enough. So if we can't think analytically, how will we ever be able to identify possible harmful or unjust developments before it is too late? Free thinking is therefore part and parcel of being authentic. Looking at it from another angle: God (the same God who gave us the Torah) gave us a brain and an amazing capacity for innovative thought, discovery, and problem-solving. It only makes sense that we have to cherish this human capacity.

Of course there are many more aspects of authenticity besides the ones I mentioned here. No doubt one could compose a long list, but basically what it comes down to is that authentic Judaism should both be loyal to its hallowed history and traditions and also be a force for good in the world at large, encouraging peaceful and wholesome innovations, or at the very least not frustrating them.

Before my eventual Orthodox conversion, I reflected on Reform Judaism,[3] and found that it did not meet my search criteria. Of course there are different levels within Reform Judaism, and I have the utmost appreciation for any level of observance that people feel they are able to apply in their lives. In the end, however, I found that people within the Reform movement are encouraged to observe on the level that they are personally most comfortable with. In essence, nothing becomes completely binding, partially because traditions may be seen as something culturally instead of divinely inspired. Fearing to be ethno-centric and particularistic, Reform Jews often tend to put a relatively high emphasis on universal values, which is in itself a good thing, but if you sacrifice too much of your own unique identity for the sake of universalism, and you end up too close to the general culture, then sooner or later the question comes up: What is the use of being a practicing Jew at all?

In other words, why would anyone sacrifice his or her time and efforts to participate in services and celebrations if people who reject these practices are just as good and meritorious? In my own spiritual journey I wanted to honor and integrate the Torah into my life, as a way to serve my Creator while growing towards a more complete, enriched, and responsible personality. But in my own experiences, what I saw among Reform Jews was often an attitude that halakha is largely archaic, kashruth is outdated, and strict adherence to the rules of Shabbat is for extremists.

Based on the above, the commitment that the Orthodox world shows for Jewish traditions would seem to more align with my beliefs. That was my own first impression as well. Torah-commandments are actually practiced with

consistency. But then again, apart from a stricter adherence to Jewish laws, sometimes the spirit behind these laws seemed to be in jeopardy. If a woman sticks out her hand in order to greet an observant man, and he refuses her hand in an unkind manner, he may be keeping with traditional law, but at the same time embarrassing or insulting a fellow human being who is unaware of his religious practice.[4] There is a rule that people should dress modestly and not expose body parts that may arouse the other sex, a practice that I believe enhances the person's dignity. But is it really dignifying if this is taken to such an extreme that a woman after her wedding is supposed to shave off all her hair so no one will ever see any of it, not even her own husband, and she has to compensate this with a wig? And is it really liberating if the pre-Pessah cleaning becomes so thorough that every single spot in the house has to be cleaned, including places such as behind the radiators or the electrical outlets, with the result that family members (often in this case the women) may enter the holiday in a frazzled state?

Perhaps as a result of the insular character of certain Jewish communities, some followers seem to lack attention or empathy for outsiders. Besides encountering many warm and wonderful people before my conversion, I also have experienced at times when I greeted someone that my outstretched hand was refused or that people looked the other way when I wished them "Shabbat Shalom." I have personally heard about a rabbi who bluntly sent away a woman who tried to enroll her child into her local Jewish Day School. The reason given was that she had no proof of being Jewish. Even though her entire family was killed in Auschwitz, this rabbi wouldn't talk to her. Does that jive with the many teachings in Torah and Talmud of dealing with people kindly and respectfully?

Judaism should be a positive force in the world, working toward peace and reconciliation. That implies accepting people even if you disagree with them. Besides, there will always be people who choose different levels of observance. Not everybody will be happy in the one denomination that we may deem the best. So Reform Judaism, even if I may disagree with a number of their teachings, still fulfills a role for a number of people. We can try to boycott and utterly defeat them, but even assuming such an effort would have a chance of success, let's first stop and think what the alternative would be if there were no Reform or Conservative synagogues where less observant people would feel comfortable. From an Orthodox perspective, at least they congregate on a regular basis to pray to God and celebrate Shabbat and holidays. They recite the Shema, proclaiming the oneness of God. Would we rather have them not go anywhere and not practice anything? Isn't any level of observance better than none, and

valuable in itself? My impression is that a number of Hareidi rabbis are so opposed to non-Orthodox communities that they would prefer people to be 100 percent secular rather than identify with these denominations.

Critical, independent thinking is a problem as well in some circles. Reinterpreting parts of Genesis in metaphoric ways,[5] in light of overwhelming proof for a much older history of our planet than formerly assumed, may place someone in the category of a heretic. Even though it seems that Orthodox Jews, through Talmud study, are trained in critical thinking and asking inquisitive questions, this notion may need to be reevaluated. The questions that are asked (and tolerated) in yeshiva circles are typically only those that fall within the framework of accepted teachings, in other words, not critical, out-of-the-box questions, to which there is no conventional or straight forward answer.

I will give you one personal example of what happened to me shortly after my conversion. It was right before Shabuoth, and I had recently started a part-time job as a religion teacher at a Jewish Day School. The three days before Shabuoth are sometimes called “sheloshet yemei hagbala” (the three days of fencing off). This refers to the story in the Torah: [6] “And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.” Many communities have specific traditions connected to these days. I raised the following question to another teacher: “We count the three days before Shabuoth as the sheloshet yemei hagbala. However according to Scripture, the giving of the Torah (which we celebrate on Shavuot) took place not after the three days, but on the third day. So if we would keep that narrative consistently, we would count the sheloshet yemei hagbala from two days before Shabuoth and consider the holiday itself as the third day.” Although I meant to raise this only as an interesting point of discussion, I was accused of rejecting the teachings of our Sages. A few days later I was told that my position had been terminated because I did not fully subscribe to the traditional teachings of Judaism.

After reading about some of my disappointing impressions of the Jewish community, one may ask what in the world made me follow through with an Orthodox-Jewish conversion. The reason is, I always believed in the beautiful ideals that the Torah and Judaism potentially embody. Having grown up in a completely non-Jewish environment, I had started out exploring and gradually practicing a Jewish lifestyle based on studying the Bible and other books that inspired me greatly and showed me a spiritual richness that is preserved and

activated through the rituals, celebrations, and life-cycle events as experienced in Judaism. My tantalizing search started before I encountered any Jewish community, and true, the encounter may initially have been a test, rather than an encouragement.

If Judaism had only consisted of Hareidi-style Orthodoxy and Reform, then I might never have pushed through to where I am now; perhaps I would never have eventually converted. I might have continued in the same vein as I lived before: leading a quasi-Jewish lifestyle, more or less on my own. But that would not have been an ideal situation, to say the least. After all, Judaism is not just a religion. What makes it unique and different from other religious entities, is that it is first and foremost a nation; a people with its own religion, its own special way to connect to God. But somewhat uniquely to Judaism, a Jew who abandons his or her faith is still a Jew.[7] And likewise, the Torah as a way of life that includes prayer, Shabbat, holidays, and so forth, can never be fully experienced outside the community. Having said all that, how did I overcome my obstacles and find my place within the Jewish people?

The answer is that I found my way into Judaism through the Sephardic community. Even though people come in all kinds and flavors in every community,[8] here I felt accepted for who I was. Nowadays not all Sephardic communities truly reflect all their principles-of-old anymore, but the classical Sephardic mindset (that can still be found in many places) was exactly what I was looking for: loyalty to Torah and tradition and at the same time open-mindedness toward modernity, sciences, and secular learning.

Being a linguist, an attractive point for me was that Sephardim have traditionally emphasized proper pronunciation of the Hebrew and the study of grammar. And very importantly, true Sephardic Judaism doesn’t have the same compartmentalization as the Ashkenazic world, where the severely observant join Hareidi communities, the moderately Orthodox congregate in less strict synagogues, the less strict go to Conservative synagogues, and the least practicing to Reform temples. Within a compartmentalized Judaism, if you worship within a community of a different level of observance than yours, chances are that you won’t feel at home. Typically in traditional Sephardic houses of worship the hakham and a number of individual members would be observant, while overall the congregants display different levels of adherence. And what is important: people tolerate each other. In other words, Sephardic synagogues are traditionally inclusive and open-minded.

Of course, Sephardic communities are going through their own issues and struggles as well. Firstly, a growing part of the Sephardic communities are falling into the “compartmentalization trap”: Reform Sephardic temples, Hareidi Sephardi synagogues, and so forth. I consider this a very unfortunate trend. On a relevant side note, in my opinion we should ask ourselves if we want Modern Orthodoxy to be yet another segment in this compartmentalization process within Judaism. Does Modern Orthodoxy want to be another sub-denomination that caters to like-minded, kindred souls? Or should Modern Orthodoxy learn from the Sephardic model and create an environment of inclusiveness: traditional style services paired with open-mindedness in thinking, in which a broad range of people feel comfortable?

Another issue, in my opinion, is that throughout the centuries, Sephardim have tried to create and facilitate unity with other Jews, often at the expense of giving up its own special identity. It seems like a natural thing in our days, but does anyone ever think about why Sephardim study the Talmud just like Ashkenazim, with the Ashkenazic commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot instead of their own commentators such as Moses Maimonides or Moses Nahmanides ? [9] Another effort to create unity was the embracing of the Shulhan Arukh as the authoritative guideline, the famous halakhic codex by Joseph Karo that comprises a mixture of Sephardic and Ashkenazic halakhic approaches and interpretations. It seemed like a good idea: Both communities make a number of compromises and end up with something that everybody agrees on. However, these compromises were to no avail for the Sephardim. Soon enough the Ashkenazim went their own sweet way by adding and following the commentaries of the Rama, often based on their own local customs. Sephardim gave up parts of their own traditions and halakhic insights for unity, but unity was not achieved. Since then Sephardim, especially the more religious ones, have moved over even further to the Ashkenazic side. Students in yeshivot follow Ashkenazic methodology, wear European-style suits and black hats, and speak in Ashkenazic lingo—so-called “yeshivish.”

I personally never understood the idealization of Eastern European culture. I don’t understand why Hungarian folk-style music became Jewish music, and why the Eastern European eighteenth-century dress code got to be considered “Jewish clothing.” Hebrew is considered more religious, more “frum” (to use one of many German terms that are in vogue in the Jewish world) when it is pronounced according to the rules of Eastern European dialects. On a personal note, these ways of pronunciation remind me of the peasant dialects I grew up around in Europe. Not that I don’t find this endearing; in a way I still do. But I never thought it appropriate to use it in prayer or liturgy. In my opinion, when someone stands

before a king, would he address him in a cockney accent, or would he make an effort to express himself in grammatically correct, proper English?

When one believes that the sources of Judaism have to be understood in their historical context, then an orientation toward the cultures of the Middle East seems more appropriate, especially in understanding the Scripture and its languages. And if at the same time one holds that Judaism has an important message that can enrich different cultures, then there is no need to imitate exotic cultures in dress or behavior. If there is an affinity, then no harm is done, but dressing up or using foreign terminology doesn't make anyone more religious.

I am sharing my thoughts on Sephardism for a reason. Authentic Sephardic Judaism, just like Modern Orthodoxy, is highly challenged by the tide of Hareidi influence. And that is not the only commonality. I believe there is much that Modern Orthodoxy can learn from the original attitudes and approaches within Sephardic heritage. Not disregarding the fact that the reality of any movement is generally less desirable than the ideals behind it, I believe that at least the original ideals of Sephardism can help Modern Orthodoxy define its aims and goals: Solid in teaching and at the same time inclusive of the less committed. A traditional definition of life's guidelines paired with open-mindedness to modernity, participation in intellectual thinking, and willingness to contribute to society at large. When necessary, redefining halakha within the limitations and perimeters of the essential sources.

What these sources are is a point of discussion, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. The term sources can mean many things to many people. Within Rabbinical Judaism there may be some to whom a source is only absolutely binding if it is a Mishnah, Tosefta or Baraita, to others a twentieth-century Responsum may be a binding source. The discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article but if Modern Orthodoxy is to be more than a diluted form of Hareidism, some crucial questions will have to be answered, such as: Within Modern Orthodoxy's orientation, what exactly is the hierarchy in authority among the writings of Tannaim, Amoraim, Geonim, Rishonim and others? Which practices can be redefined, largely depends on the answers given.

One relevant observation between Sephardic and traditional Ashkenazic attitudes is a somewhat different approach to local customs (minhagim). No doubt, the Talmud gives importance and authority to minhagim, but the scope and definition of this principle, in my perception, is not entirely the same within the two traditions. Of course Sephardim are just as proud as others of their own liturgy, including tunes and piyyutim, [10] their specific way of putting on tefillin, or their

special haroset recipes. Nonetheless they have displayed a somewhat different attitude towards the binding character of customs. If changing circumstances, communal needs, or even insights necessitated it, Sephardic hakhamim on occasion have changed even well-established customs in favor of the application of other halakhic interpretations. This seems to reflect an underlying belief that not every custom automatically has the halakhic status of minhag. In contrast, many Ashkenazim consider any established custom a halakhically binding practice. This has far reaching consequences. In Ashkenazic circles there can be in-depth discussions on certain halakhic questions, going over the Mishna, Gemara, Geonim, Rishonim, Aharonim, commentaries on commentaries, looking at it from all directions and perspectives, and a halakhically satisfactory answer to the problem may emerge, but in the end the result can be wiped off the table with the remark: “But our minhag is different.” I would like to illustrate this with an example related to the tzitzith.[11] According to Torah law, a man is obliged to fulfill the requirement of wearing tzitzith if he has a four cornered garment. [12] He does not need to buy such a garment (i.e., a tallith [13] ) in order to attach tzitzith to it and fulfill the commandment. However, from several authoritative halakhic writings it is clear that one should make an effort to own a tallith (with tzitzith), and wear it, especially during prayer. [14] In Eastern Europe, where people used to be poor and could not easily afford to buy a tallith, it became the practice for a groom to be gifted a tallith as a wedding present. Thus in those communities men customarily did not pray with a tallith before marriage. At a certain point this was perceived as an official minhag, endowed with halakhic power, and even though nowadays most descendants of Eastern European Jews can afford to buy a tallith, many unmarried men will not fulfill their halakhic requirement of donning a tallith during prayer because “it is not my minhag.” From here we can see the important role that the concept of minhag plays to the extent that it can override (pure) halakhic considerations. As a side effect, minhag has become such a determining factor in halakha, that it makes any chance for renewal or change impossible. Even if there are good ethical and halakhic reasons to change a practice, if the concept of minhag renders a practice “law,” change will be blocked.

However, within the classic Sephardic approach, this has been quite different. A clear example can be found with Maimonides in his halakhic codex Mishneh Torah. It is clear that Maimonides intended to unite all of Judaism through this codex by deciding once and for all on the most correct interpretations of Jewish law. The concept of minhag played little to no role in his project. Thus it seems that in Maimonides’ view customs can exist and develop around halakha, but they don’t have halakhic power in themselves and thus can never overrule halakhic

rules or push them away.[15] I believe a revision of the concept of minhag in congruency with this classical Sephardi approach, is essential for Modern Orthodoxy in defining an authentic model for future reconsideration of halakhic practice, when necessary.

What is Modern Orthodoxy's position among the other currents of Judaism? Throughout his body of work, Rodney Stark, professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion,[16] distinguishes between—on the one hand—religious movements with relatively intense levels of commitment. Such movements require of their adherents high levels of compliancy and investments in terms of devoted time, lifestyle and dedication, while at the same time offering high spiritual and often social rewards. However, these movements tend to exist in relatively sharp tension with their cultural environment. On the opposite end of the spectrum are low intensity religious movements that require very modest investments and dedication. Such movements exist in relative harmony with their environment, but they also give little in return in terms of community life and spiritual rewards. One of the challenges of high tension ideologies is that, while there is certainly a considerable group of people that find satisfaction in such movements, every next generation of people that grow up in such high-demanding communities tends to gravitate towards lower levels of commitment and towards less tension with the general culture. Therefore, over time, high intensity movements tend to become less intense. However, people are not all the same, and often this process is interrupted when a group of people from within the movement stand up to turn the tide, demanding higher intensity commitments (and rewards). This is how revival movements and sects originate.

In the first place this distinction can help explain why many who look for spirituality and meaning in Judaism, are attracted to Hareidism. I am talking about those non-Jews who turn to Judaism for religious and spiritual reasons, in contrast to those who are moved by social motivations. The mere fact that these people search for meaning and truth beyond their ancestral horizon already puts them in the category of "big investors," high intensity devotees. Furthermore these movements attract their attention simply because in general, the most outspoken expressions define a religion's reputation in the world.

It is tempting to look at the different currents of Judaism in the above described manner: Hareidi Orthodoxy as a high intensity community, Conservative and Reform Judaism as relatively low intensity movements, and somewhere in the middle Modern Orthodoxy with a medium intensity level. Professor Stark describes a general phenomenon in religion, and Judaism has the same pulls-and-

pushes as other faiths. But Modern Orthodoxy is not just a haven for people who long for a certain, moderate level of commitment, not too extreme, not too liberal. It should be much more…

The future of Modern Orthodoxy depends on how it will define and profile itself. This may prove to be no small challenge. At present one can find communities that define themselves as Modern Orthodox with the only difference from the Hareidi world being that, working for a living alongside Torah study is not considered a second choice. Others who are called Modern Orthodox have made more radical changes towards egalitarian services and women clergy. Modern Orthodoxy needs to find its own position between the worlds of innovation without fixed tradition and fixed tradition without innovation. In order to be successful and offer a credible alternative to either of the extremes, it needs to develop its own religious philosophy and its own halakhic scholarship. In order to offer more than a moderate version of Hareidi orthodoxy, Modern Orthodox scholars need to know halakha at least as good, preferably better than Hareidi scholars, which is a huge task but not impossible. In too many yeshivot much time is spent on detailed studies of marginal topics and on creating artificial reconciliations of contradicting opinions that cannot be genuinely reconciled for the simple reason that they are contradicting opinions. In the process, a real overall understanding of halakha often gets lost in studying minute details. Modern Orthodoxy should not just delve into the study of halakha, but grasp its structures and underlying principles as well.

In the process we need to educate our children in the spirit of Modern Orthodoxy, which is more than just a weakened form of Orthodox Yeshivish schooling. This means exposing our youth to authentic, primary sources that support an approach of Judaism as described above, solid in halakha, innovative in thinking. If we fail, our children will soon pick up on the notion that the more serious you are about Judaism, the more yeshivish you become. And before you know it, Modern Orthodoxy will fall in the same trap as the multitudes of Sephardim who surrendered to a mindset of Lithuanian yeshivot.

Modern Orthodoxy is walking a fine line, on a tightrope between a total surrender to modern, secular thinking on the one side, and on the other side totally immersing in religiosity while giving up participation in the modern world of science, philosophy, etc. The only chance we have in fulfilling the Jewish ideal of impregnating the material world and general society with spirituality, is if we can be exactly where we are: in the middle, where we can integrate both worlds. But it is no easy place to be and there is no easy solution. We cannot design a new,

prescribed way of life, no matter how modern or moderate it might be, and follow it blindly. That would be betraying the ideals of Modern Orthodoxy. We always need to look at the way we do things and ask ourselves if we are loyal to our heritage and at the same time what the effects are of our practice on the people and the world around us. What are the possible negative side effects of our conduct? Should we rephrase, reframe and rethink our teaching and practice? In order to answer those questions, we have to know clearly what we stand for and what we have to offer that is so special and that we world is in need of. This implies that we need to know the secular world real well and at the same time excel in our knowledge of Jewish heritage, spirituality and ethics. We need to offer high quality education for young people and enable new, inspiring leadership to emerge. The demands on them will be enormous. But then again, it is hard to be a (Modern Orthodox) Jew.

[1] I wrote about my spiritual quest in Rabbi M.D. Angel's: Choosing to be Jewish. Hoboken, 2005, pp. 25–35.
[2] Ritual swaying of worshippers during prayer.
[3] While my native country, the Netherlands, has no Conservative Jewish community, the existing Reform congregations there are in my opinion closer to the Conservative than to the American Reform movement, both in philosophy and ritual observance.
[4] Of course if this person would make an alternative gesture, such as a friendly bow, then this would not be rude.
[5] In line with Maimonides' approach that whatever in the Torah conflicts with science, should be interpreted as metaphorical.
[6] Exodus 19, 10–11.
[7] In contrast, a Christian who rejects his/her Christian creed is not considered a Christian any more.
[8] Of course there are many wonderful Ashkenazim and needless to say, not every Sephardi is a lovable person either.
[9] In fact, Maimonides only wrote a commentary on the Mishnah (be it an extensive one) but not on the Gemara, while Nahmanides is considered by some to be influenced already by Ashkenazic thinking. So in all honestly, classic Sephardic Talmud commentaries just happen to be less available than Ashkenazic ones.
[10] Liturgical poems
[11] Ritual fringes
[12] Numbers 15, 37–41.
[13] Usually translated as "prayer shawl"
[14] Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahava, Hilkhot Tefilla, Chapter 5, Halakha 5; Hilkhot

Tzitzith, Chapter 3, Halakha 11; Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, Chapter 2, 24:1.
[15] This approach to minhag seems to me more authentic. I have never heard of a Babylonian Amora who travelled to Eretz Yisra’el and kept two days of Yom Tov while there, because it was his custom.
[16] See: e.g. For the Glory of God, pp. 17–20, 25–27.