Marginal Minority Experience:

The Case Study of the Nineteenth-Century Jewish Theologian and Novelist, Grace Aguilar

Daniel Langton

Grace Aguilar (1816–1847) has been described as the most important female Anglo-Jewish writer in the nineteenth-century. She belonged to a traditionally observant Sephardi family from Hackney, London, and felt keenly the ambiguous experience of being a member of a minority Jewish community in a majority Christian one.

In a work of fiction that should be read autobiographically, she wrote:

Our very position as aliens in a land whose religion is not ours... in a small country town almost entirely surrounded by Christians... must increase the mental difficulties we Jews are now enduring...

Circumstances have thrown us almost entirely among Protestants.

Aguilar died aged only 31. Of her fifteen books, a number became best-sellers, specifically her novels Home Influence (1847) and The Vale of Cedars (1850). The readership of her books was mixed. It is clear from dedications and prefaces that she intended Jewish and Christian mothers and daughters to benefit from her novels and anthologies, such as Women of Israel (1845). The same was true for her more theologically-orientated works, such as The Spirit of Judaism (1842), The Jewish Faith (1846), and Sabbath Thoughts and Sacred Communings (1853) – although in writing these studies she was also highly conscious of a male audience, both Christian and Jewish. Aguilar’s mid-nineteenth-century historical context was that of Victorian religiosity and the emergence of Anglo-Reform Judaism and the establishment of the West London Reform Synagogue in 1840, which she appears to have regarded with mixed feelings. The influence of her Sephardi background is also important. Crypto-Jewish families in early-modern Portugal or Spain (Jewish families pretending to be Christian on pain of death or expulsion) could only have risked expressing their Judaism within the secret realm of the home. Aguilar believed that her family history offered a precedent for a woman story-teller who took responsibility for the generational transmission of Jewish identity.

From even a cursory glance at her various works, it is clear that she had set out from the beginning to persuade Christians to respect Judaism, and to encourage and develop among Jews, especially Jewish women, a pietistic form of spirituality. That she was influential in her own day in terms of bridging the divide between the Jewish and Christian communities is demonstrated by front page treatment of her death in the Jewish Chronicle.

In approaching Aguilar as an illustrative example of the complexities of living as a Jew within Protestant England, we will focus upon just one of her many books: The Jewish Faith (1846). In this literary fiction, Aguilar presented a series of letters of religious advice from a Sephardi Jewess Inez Villena to a young girl Annie, who was contemplating conversion, having had only a nominal Jewish upbringing. The artifice of placing her own words in the mouth of an eminently sympathetic woman gave Aguilar greater intellectual freedom than she had had in her other theological writings. In this
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Aguilar was a fervent champion of the idea of Judaism as a profoundly spiritual faith, contrary to the claims of Christian critics who viewed it as dry, legalised fossil of a religion. Yet she felt obliged to acknowledge that contemporary Judaism did not live up to its own teachings and that its practice in England was not ideal, mired by an often obsessive concern with ceremony and rabbinic learning. To solve what she saw as an atrophy of the Jewish religion, it was necessary to investigate the causes. In The Jewish Faith Aguilar argued that the kind of Anglo-Judaism which privileged external form over spirituality had had its origins in the Sephardi experience of Inquisition and crypto-Judaism. The lives of those Jews, she explained, had been habituated to caution and hurried, superficial observance, and this de-spiritualised conception of religion had continued upon their arrival in England. This state of affairs was, while understandable, a matter of regret. As she explained:

In Portugal, as you know, to be even suspected as a Jew exposed your ancestors to all the horrors of the Inquisition, sequestration, torture, and often, death. The religion of our fathers, therefore, was instilled with such impenetrable secrecy, and so burdened with caution and the constant dread of discovery, that, to do more than attend to its mere elements, and keep the mind faithful to the doctrine of the Divine Unity and the perpetuity of the Jewish Faith, in contradistinction to the bewildering dogmas of saints, martyrs, infallibility of the Roman Church, masses, etc., was impossible. To become spiritual was equally so, for the Bible was a forbidden book.

The nature of the complicated relationship between the minority and majority communities to which she belonged.

Aguilar was describing the challenge that faces many religious minority groups who find themselves in new surroundings, namely the dilemma of how to acculturate with integrity and how to decide which past cultural practices and patterns of thought were of enduring value and which were unserviceable and detrimental.

How, then, might one go about inculcating the kind of spirituality that Aguilar saw as lacking within Judaism? At the time, the problem was made more acute by the lack of a Jewish English translation of the Bible, which would have been an obvious source of teaching. Nevertheless, in her mind it would have been a mistake to assume that the surrounding Christian culture had a monopoly upon pious, edifying literature. As the Sephardi matron Villena, Aguilar sought to convince Annie, the Jewish girl who was considering conversion, that the inspirational texts of promise, narrative and spiritual guidance, that sounded as though they belonged to the New Testament, actually belonged to their own Bible.

Villena/Aguilar observed with some pleasure that modern expressions of Judaism were increasingly dependent upon the Bible, suggesting that erroneous teachings would soon be a thing of the past, for, she said, the Talmudic sages had never intended that their ingenious commentaries would have taken the place of the Word of God. The same would be true of contemporary un-biblical hopes such as the much-discussed Jewish return to Palestine. There was a dire need for religious, edifying literature for Jewish women in the English vernacular; for whom the wisdom of the Jewish sages was impossible to master.

Although many other modern authorities had proved a bitter disappointment, Aguilar...
had found inspirational the biblicentric Reform minister David Wolf-Marks’ attempt to reconcile the threat of the law with the comfort of the prophets. So, for Aguilar, the hope of acculturation with integrity of Jews within England depended to a large extent upon the return to the Bible. This is evidence for the influence of Evangelical Christian critique of Judaism that was also vehemently anti-Talmudic. Aguilar’s protestation that her vision of a biblical Judaism would prevent conversion does not convince me otherwise in her case, as it failed to do for many of her contemporaries.

A minority must ultimately decide how it relates to the majority at a human or communal level, and this is often expressed in highly ambivalent terms. It is in The Jewish Faith that Aguilar wrestled most profoundly with the relationship between the two religious communities, and where we can find bound together many of her complex, even conflicting, views. The attractions to Christianity were many, including the comforting hope of a re-union with lost loved ones, the devotional literature that explained religion, and gave strength and comfort in affliction, the apparent life and peace of religion, you had felt that, if you were a Christian, you might hope to experience all this, but that as a Jewess, it was impossible – that there were so many books, not merely to explain the Christian religion, but to give sympathy and comfort in every affliction – that there were churches frequent, and so many home-speaking, heart-appealing prayers to help them to lift up their thoughts to God, that could you but be a Christian, you might be comforted, and even happy – that you have been tempted most strongly to adopt the Christian faith… Whenever you asked any questions regarding religion, your friend had entreated you to seek information from your own – that in her family, as in other of your Protestant friends, religion was actually taught, made a rule for life, and you could not recall any Jewish family in which this was the case, even your own … I agree with you in the many and far superior advantages of the Christian over us [Jews]. Religious books adapted for our youth and sympathising in our feelings, we have not indeed. With the sole exception of one Synagogue in London, our houses of worship cannot be to our youth as the Christians’ are to theirs … (Aguilar, 32–33.)

But such grounds, Aguilar argued, were not reason enough to convert, for the doctrine of immortality had been a Hebrew one before Christian, and it was not a Christian life which gave peace, but rather one properly centred on the Bible. More problematic was the fact that Villena/Aguilar was prepared to acknowledge throughout her life that, if you were a Christian, your heart, the true spiritual believing Christian”. Jesus had been a Jew whose followers had taught the Gentiles the knowledge of the Lord and the Moral Law more accessibly. She thus rejoiced at the efforts of “those noble and pure-spirited” Christian missionaries who brought “some knowledge of the divine commands… to benighted lands”. Of course there were enemies among the Nazarenes, but where Christians dedicated themselves to the Bible, there had been less persecution of the Jews.

When I wrote to you in my first letter of the necessity, the strength and peace of religion, you had felt that, if you were a Christian, you might hope to experience all this, but that as a Jewess, it was impossible – that there were so many books, not merely to explain the Christian religion, but to give sympathy and comfort in every affliction – that there were churches frequent, and so many home-speaking, heart-appealing prayers to help them to lift up their thoughts to God, that could you but be a Christian, you might be comforted, and even happy – that you have been tempted most strongly to adopt the Christian faith… Whenever you asked any questions regarding your own religion, your friend entreated you to seek information from your own – that in her family, as in other of your Protestant friends, religion was actually taught, made a rule for life, and you could not recall any Jewish family in which this was the case, even your own … I agree with you in the many and far superior advantages of the Christian over us [Jews]. Religious books adapted for our youth and sympathising in our feelings, we have not indeed. With the sole exception of one Synagogue in London, our houses of worship cannot be to our youth as the Christians’ are to theirs … (Aguilar, 32–33.)

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Judaism was lagging behind Anglo-Christian spirituality and intellectuality. Therefore it would do no harm and much good if the girl was to draw upon Christian devotional literature, for example, for a thorough grounding in one’s own religion would keep one alive to the rare possibility of confusion of doctrine. Annie would be spiritually uplifted, and should not be afraid. As she explained,

If we would seek aid for serious thought, we must go to Christian books ... The spirit of the Christian religion is equally the spirit of the Hebrew; for both owe their origin to the same Bible.

**Grace Aguilar**

Nor should one be concerned with those who were suspicious about the influence of Christianity in this construction of a spiritualised Judaism. Those who denied it only strengthened the hand of Christian critics who regarded Judaism as unspiritual. This account, synthesized from the letters, is as close to a coherent theology as we are likely to find. And yet it remains riddled through with problematic aspirations.

Aguilar’s particular interfaith project should be categorized as an ‘appreciative relational theology’ in that it sought to portray the majority culture, Christianity, in a way that encouraged mutual understanding and respect in the minority culture, Judaism. Aguilar was more than simply a reform-oriented Jew with a burning desire to convince Christians of the respectability of Judaism. She was developing an ideological framework to prevent conversion and to justify why one should remain a Jew. She presented a robust critique of Christianity’s distinctive doctrines, and yet also granted it a positive value-judgement, even to the extent of encouraging a sense of identification with it, and emulation of it.