**Orthodox, Conservative  and Reform Judaism**

**Contrasts**

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| **Issue** | **Orthodox** | **Conservative** | **Reform** |
| **Origin** | **Born out of a self-redefinition of Traditional Judaism in reaction to 19th century Reform Judaism** | **Born, within 19th century scientific/liberal paradigm,  out of  Traditional Judaism in reaction to 19th century Reform Judaism** | **Radical reinvention of Traditional Judaism in confrontation with Christianity, Western civilization and political-social emancipation** |
| **Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy)** | **a God-given work communicated in its entirety to Moses known as the doctrine of *Torah Min Hashamayim*** | **a God-inspired work but perceived through the medium of one or more human beings.  Some parts (e.g.. 10 Commandments) may be more God-inspired than others (e.g. the demands to exterminate entire Canaanite populations)** | **Same as Conservative** |
| **Relevancy of Torah** | **As expounded in the Halakha (Oral Law) binding on all aspects of life of Jews except where it conflicts with civil law (doctrine of dina demalkhuta dina)** | **As expounded in the Halakha, including latest Conservative interpretations, binding on all aspects of life of Jews except where it conflicts with civil law** | **Considered as source of Jewish history and the history of Israel's relationship with God.  Only ethical aspects considered binding though other elements may be adopted by individuals if they find them meaningful\*\*..** |
| **Study of Torah** | **- confined to traditional commentaries except for occasional illustrations from archaeology and comparative linguistics. - Modern Critical approach (MCA)\* not permitted.** | **Traditional commentaries plus MCA** | **Same as Conservative** |
| **Study of  Niviim and Ketuvim (Hebrew Bible beyond Deuteronomy)** | **- Except among Modern Orthodox in Israel it is little studied.**  **- Parts generally well known are those connected with the liturgy i.e. the haphtarot, Psalms, Esther, Song of Songs, Lamentations.**  **- Traditional commentaries, above all Rashi, are used.  No principle would prevent use of MCA\* but its use is frowned upon.** | **Traditional commentaries plus MCA** | **Same as Conservative** |
| **Study of Talmud** | **- Practically the only subject of serious study. study almost exclusively traditional using medieval commentaries.  - No principle would prevent use of MCA\* but its use would be psychologically disturbing i.e. it might raise such questions as "have binding and axial decisions in the development of Halakha been based on a corrupt or misunderstood text?".** | **- Traditional commentaries plus MCA.  - Talmud study less wide-spread among the laity than among religious Orthodox.** | **Same as Conservative though little study carried out in practice except for rabbinic specialists.** |
| **Belief in Origin of Halakha** | **- Basic methods of deriving Halakha, and hence the origin of the Oral Law - Mishnah, Gemara, codes, commentary on codes - was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai by God along with the Written Torah.  Hence, the Halakha is binding.**  **- This position is based on faith.  I.e. it can only be defended in rational comparative literary-historical analysis through special pleading.** | **The Oral Law grew up, under divine influence, through such factors as:**  **- interpretations and developments within the Torah**  **- decisions and influence of the rabbis**  **- folk customs**  **- economic pressures**  **- outside cultural, religious and other influences**    **Essentially this is based on faith as informed by modern scholarly research** | **Same as Conservative** |
| **Derivation of Halakha** | **- Mainly from: codes (especially Shulkhan Arukh); their commentaries (e.g. Mishnah Berurah); and, the responsa literature.**  **- Relatively little discretion given to modern rabbis (doctrine of** [**mi'ut hadorot**](http://www.adath-shalom.ca/miut.htm) **- i.e. as we get further from the revelation on Sinai we understand it less)**  **- tendency to go for strictest option in rabbinic rulings to avoid criticism from Ultra-orthodox**  **- little desire to mould Halakha to modern realities** | **Several inputs:**  **- codes, their commentaries and, the responsa literature.**  **- historical awareness of the changes, and reason for the changes, in Jewish practice through the ages**  **- a division between more and less important mitzvoth (commandments)**  **- a strong desire to mould Halakha to modern realities**  **- the full discretion exercised by early medieval authorities exercised by the movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards** | **Do not accept binding nature of Halakha so this is a non-issue\*\*** |
| **Importance of Halakha** | **- considered binding on all aspects of life of Jews except where it conflicts with civil law**  **- free will - every Jew has the choice of either obeying the mitzvahs thus submitting to the will of God or defying God's will by flouting the mitzvahs i.e. sinning** | **same as Orthodox** | **considered a source from which individual Jews may draw ceremonies and other practices which they, personally find meaningful.** |
| **Actual Observance of Halakha** | **Among observant high** | **High mainly among rabbinate.  Low among lay members.** | **Do not accept binding nature of Halakha so this is a non-issue** |
| **Dedication to Jewish Scholarship** | **Among observant often high** | **High mainly among rabbinate.  Low among lay members.** | **Same as Conservative** |
| **Attitude to Jewish Peoplehood and Zionism** | **Theoretically strong but practically can be anything from strong to very weak.  Attitude to Zionism can be anything from strong to very weak.** | **Theoretically and practically strong.** | **Originally denied Jewish Peoplehood and was anti-Zionist.  Both positions now reversed\*\*.** |
| **Attitude to Secular Studies** | **varies from total rejection to accepting that they are economically beneficial and may even, selectively, enhance the understanding of Torah** | **positive** | **positive** |

\* Modern Critical approach (MCA), as used here, includes 3 types of modern diachronic (historical-evolutionary) criticism:

1. Current Text (Lower Criticism) - Questions relating to the state of the current text e.g. has the text become corrupt by processes such as misspelling of words, confusion of word order, marginal notes being copied into the text, words dropped out, wrong word division?

2. Pre-History of the Text (Higher Criticism) - How did the current text come into being?

3. Historical Background - Exploration of the forces at work on society that produced the text as reflected in the text itself e.g. the intellectual milieu, economic conflicts.  This will often show, for example, that the scientific outlook and intellectual categories of the Tennaim were Hellenistic and not specifically Jewish or that laws were discarded because of economic stress or because they appeared abhorrent to the dominant culture (e.g.. polygamy).

\*\* see <http://www.ccarnet.org/platforms/>

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**Strengths and Weaknesses**

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|  | **Orthodox** | **Conservative** | **Reform** |
| **Strengths** | **- Aura of being the genuine Traditional Judaism**  **- fervor of committed** | **- flexible interpretation of Halakha**  **- power professional scholarship**  **- wide tolerance of divergent trends** | **- fits exactly into the "religion" pigeonhole of modern Western Culture.**  **- is not burdensome in that it does not transgress widely into the social and economic spheres except on the level of ethics**  **- wide tolerance of divergent (even atheistic!) trends** |
| **Weaknesses** | **- very limited flexibility and little desire to attempt a symbiotic meeting with the modern world**  **- refusal to use MCA (see above) with Torah and Talmud caused a sort of intellectual split between the rational-analytic tools to be used to solve mundane problems and the tools to be used to solve religious problems.** | **- the greatest weakness, in terms of its own principles, is the low level of commitment to obeying the Halakha among its own members**  **- lack of fervor among members**  **- lack of rigorous intellectual rationale for considering the Halakha as divinely required for Jews with developed historical understanding** | **- The platforms adopted since the famous Pittsburgh Platform 1885 (see** [**http://www.ccarnet.org/platforms/**](http://www.ccarnet.org/platforms/)**) have been somewhat lacking in cogency.  Since Reform has traditionally been a dogmatic religion< not coincidentally like Christianity, this is important**  **- its recognition of a legitimate secular sphere of life may be seen to run counter to holistic thought which would maintain that every aspect of a person's life, and every decision made, is implicitly value-laden**  **- it is, in terms of practical burdens imposed, an easy option for Orthodox and Conservative dropouts.** |

**Conservative Views on Revalation**

**Conservative Theology**

**“Conservative Jews believe that God in some way revealed His will to Moses and to later prophets. Records and traditions relating to such events were transmitted in various forms for centuries, until the Torah was redacted into its final form, sometime around the time of Ezra (450 B.C.E.). Thus, Conservative Jews are comfortable with the findings of archeological and linguistic research and critical textual study; these reveal that the Torah was redacted together from several sources coming from different times and places. In fact, Conservative Jews make use of literary and historical analysis to understand how these texts developed, and to help them understand how they may applied in our own day. Thus, they see no conflict between modern biblical scholarship and adherence to Jewish law.”**

**Source http://groups.msn.com/judaismfaqs/revelationandtorah.msnw**