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Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism: A Jewish Perspective

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Why does the concept of religious pluralism arouse such intense reactions among people? No one, it seems, is neutral about it.

Some people compare pluralism to a symphony orchestra with individual members or groups playing different instruments. By themselves, these individuals or groups are only soloists, but playing together they make beautiful orchestral music. Using this analogy, pluralism means no individual or group is more dominant or more important than any other orchestra members.

Of course, the reverse of this analogy might be also true. Instead of a harmonious symphony orchestra, pluralism can also mean a dissonant, cacophonous sound, discordant and disruptive.

Those who distrust pluralism believe it undermines religious beliefs and weakens spiritual identities. Still others may grudgingly concede that while theological diversity does exist, they are unhappy about its existence. In their hearts they believe: "I know there are many religions in the world, but if I had my way, I would want everyone to believe as I and my religious group do."

Pluralism, whether desired or not, means that all groups and individuals have a distinctive contribution to make to the well-being and

enrichment of society. Pluralism means a religion with a large number of members is not superior to a religion that appeals to only a few. And a majority is not permitted to dominate or persecute a minority. Obviously, this kind of pluralism has not been accepted throughout the world. It remains a distant goal for many people and many societies.

But here in the United States, religious pluralism has flourished as in few other places in the world As a direct result of the religious strife in Europe, especially the Thirty Years' War, the Spanish Inquisition, and the excesses committed in Britain against religious dissenters during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the framers of the U.S. Constitution provided specific safeguards for religious liberty, and by doing so provided a seedbed for the growth of religious pluralism.

The Constitution forbids "religious tests" for public office, and the First Amendment guarantees the free exercise of religion and the prevention of any one group or groups from becoming America's officially established religion. A singular hallmark of America is its strong emphasis on religious freedom.

These constitutional guarantees have allowed a vigorous pluralism to develop in the United States. But pluralism is highly challenging to many because religion, after all, offers ultimate answers to questions about life and death and about the very purpose of existence. To affirm that there are multiple—but nonetheless authentic—religious responses to these questions is sometimes difficult for believers.

Pluralism asserts there are many genuine spiritual paths to follow. Pluralism also maintains that each path is legitimate and that every religious expression represents spiritual truths that must be respected and protected from assault.

Pluralism compels individuals to acknowledge there are various ways to achieve a spiritually fulfilling life. While all religions are true for their adherents, pluralism posits the claim that no one religion contains all the truth for everyone.

With such bold assertions, is it any wonder that the concept of religious pluralism can affirm our deepest faith commitments and profoundly challenge them at the same time?

A pressing task today is the development of a theological foundation for religious pluralism. Such a theology of pluralism, as I like to call it, is no easy assignment, but it is urgently required. People of faith and the faiths themselves need to plumb the depths of their spiritual traditions to discover the necessary religious support for pluralism.

It is not enough that we simply live together as unique faith communities, hopefully without tension or conflict. Rather, our faiths must sustain and nurture our shared existence in a pluralistic setting. Unless that happens, the cruel winds of religious bigotry and extremism, combined with political and cultural turbulence and economic dislocation, can spell disaster.

Believers have no trouble affirming and celebrating the truth of their own religion. It is much harder, but equally important, for people

of faith to acknowledge the truth and legitimacy of other religions.

Today, it is no longer sufficient, much less desirable, for separate faith communities merely to live side by side. Instead, religious faith must provide a genuine spiritual mooring in a world where people who believe differently can live together in peace.

A theological underpinning would ensure pluralism's permanence no matter what the political, economic, or social conditions of a society may be. A pluralism rooted in religious affirmations is more enduring than even a well-intentioned sense of tolerance for the diverse spiritual beliefs that are extant among one's neighbors.

A theology of pluralism is also needed to complement the constitutional safeguards that are currently ours in the United States. Developing a theology of pluralism, however, must not be perceived as some kind of surrender to the contemporary age. It is not a "cop out" to the exigencies of modernity. Nor is a viable theology of pluralism an example of moral relativism in the modern age. It is a recognition that there is and apparently will continue to be a wide variety of religious expressions operating under a universal God.

Let me be clear: As a Jew who has lived through the middle and latter part of this century, I believe a strong religious pluralism is a necessary antidote, a powerful counterforce, to the horrendous totalitarianisms that have dominated so much of this century.

Obviously, in a century that has produced

fascism, communism, and Nazism, two world wars, the Holocaust, and endless ethnic and religious wars, the need for a viable, theologically rooted sense of pluralism is self-evident. In fact, it can be argued that modern totalitarianism, in whatever its evil form, is the absolute antithesis of the kind of pluralism I am advocating.

While some people think theology is a set of eternal beliefs etched in stone, I believe theology constantly changes from generation to generation. As we well know, in the past some theologians provided strong religious sanctions for believing that women, blacks, Jews, and American Indians were inferior human and/or spiritual beings. Fiercely held tenets about hell as a place of punishment after death are now challenged by the belief that we pay for our sins here on earth through guilt, shame, and disgrace.

Theological concepts attributing masculine characteristics to God are under severe attack. And theologians are constantly reinterpreting the Bible's meaning, the definition of prayer, the nature of God, and such concepts as sin, miracles, and revelations.

It is now time to devote the same energy, talent, and time toward the development of a theology of pluralism. And to that end, the second part of this paper is an exploration of establishing a Jewish religious foundation for pluralism. In this exploration, I want to thank Rabbi Alan Mittleman of Muhlenberg College, a former interreligious affairs specialist at the American Jewish Committee, for his insightful efforts in this important area of inquiry.

From the very beginning of its existence as a religious tradition, Judaism has had to confront, sometimes in friendly ways, sometimes in murderous hostility, the presence of other religious traditions. Through the long centuries, Jews and Judaism have been compelled to make sense of non-Jews and of religions that are not Judaism.

But then Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism have had similar problems of relating to their neighbors, and in some cases to adherents of a religion that predated their own. In the case of Christianity, this has created special problems because of its Jewish origins, its Jewish roots, and the claim, held by many Christians, that their religious faith is, in fact, the spiritual successor to Judaism.

While I certainly have some quite specific ideas and suggestions on the subject, Christianity's relationship to Judaism and, indeed, to other living faiths is best left to Christian theologians and scholars. But because our two faith communities are so interrelated by fate and faith, and by history and Scripture, neither I and my Jewish colleagues nor Christian theologians can act in isolation from each other. In a very real sense, "the whole world is watching" what we achieve, or fail to achieve, in the area of a theology of pluralism.

Two traditional Jewish teachings are helpful in articulating a theological case for pluralism. The first is the concept of the "universal" and the "particular" that is found in Judaism. That Judaism and its followers, the Jewish people, are a "particular" people and religion is a continuing leitmotiv. The Hebrew phrases *am s'gulah* (a

treasured people) and *am hanivhar* (a people chosen) represent this basic idea.

But always running as a parallel stream was the constant awareness of the perpetual dichotomy between being a particular religious community and living in a universalistic world, a world filled with diverse faiths and cultures. There is a rich diversity in God's world with which the ancient rabbis were fully aware.

The biblical story of the Tower of Babel represents a warning against an arrogant attempt to "depluralize" the world. Babel is an early expression of totalitarianism. It was perceived as a direct challenge of the ultimate universal force, God. The tower was an attempt to force a false unity down the unwilling throats of a diverse society. To my Jewish ears, the later cries of "error has no rights" and "only one way to God" are echoes of the Babel story.

A Jewish theology of pluralism can be successfully developed, it seems to me, by drawing upon the traditional rabbinical concept of the seven Laws of Noah as first articulated in the second century of the Common Era. Because of its source, in *Tosefta,* and because of its age, this Noahide concept cannot be simply dismissed as a modern invention cynically designed to meet the peculiar needs of our modern age.

On the contrary, the Noahide laws represent an early, earnest, and effective religious interpretation of the spiritual diversity that is a permanent feature of God's universe.

The children of Noah—that is, non-Jews—were required to obey seven specific laws: (1) the establishment of courts of justice, (2) the prohibition of idolatry, (3) the prohibition of blasphemy, (4) the prohibition of bloodshed, (5) the prohibition of sexual immorality, (6) a ban on robbery, and (7) the prohibition of eating meat that was ripped from a live animal.

The rabbis carefully linked these seven laws to a time in history that predated the revelation at Mt. Sinai. By so doing, they were able to anchor the Noahide laws in a distant time frame, and not in their own generation. While Jews, following Sinai, are commanded to observe and carry out 613 divine commandments, people who are not Jews are obliged to fulfill only seven.

One of the best known rabbinic sayings, "The righteous of the world have a place or a share in the world to come," indicates that there is "salvation outside the synagogue." For Gentiles, *ha-goyim,* to be saved, it is not necessary to assume the yoke of the Torah that Jews have historically accepted. The biblical verses from both Isaiah and Micah buttress this belief: "My house is a house of prayer for all peoples" and "Let all the peoples walk each one in the name of God, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever."

With its extraordinary emphasis on the prohibition of idolatry, the Noahide formula is a brilliant attempt to balance the universal with the particular as experienced by the rabbis 1800 years ago. Following the development of the Noahide laws, intense debate within Judaism still raged over the status of Christianity. Was Christianity a valid expression of religious truth? Or was it a form of religious idolatry, with its

emphasis upon a man-God? Did the Incarnation and the Trinity enhance the possibility of Christians becoming Noahides, or did these theological beliefs diminish that chance?

Do Christians merit the Noahide title? Is Christianity still intimately linked to the God of Israel, even though it takes a form different from Judaism? Should Jews engage in commerce and other forms of contact with Christians? Should the oaths and vows of Christians who invoke the name of God be accepted as truthful?

Since Jews are "already with the Father, the God of Israel," what is the position and status of Christians? Moses Maimonides, who had much greater contact with Islam, expressed doubts about whether Christianity had fully removed itself from idolatry. But other rabbis of the medieval period had more positive views of Christianity.

By the twelfth century, fully a thousand years after the rabbinic definition of Noahides, many rabbis had defined Christianity as a Noahide faith because of its reverence for the Hebrew Bible and its active attempts to bring the knowledge of the God of Israel to the world. While Jews and Christians clearly differed on biblical interpretations and on the precise knowledge of God, nonetheless, by the twelfth century, many Jewish religious leaders had granted Christianity a special status.

Despite my admiration for the authors of *Tosefta,* I am well aware that the seven Noahide laws carry us only so far in a quest for a theology of religious pluralism, and with it an understanding of Christianity. As many scholars have

correctly noted, the twentieth-century German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig reached roughly the same conclusions as the medieval rabbis, but he did so without employing the Noahide laws.

For Rosenzweig, who utilized modern philosophy, Christianity was the Gentile, non-Jewish way to reach God, but just as Gentiles can achieve spiritual salvation outside of Judaism, the reverse is equally true. Jews, "already with God" and rejoicing in the life of Torah, need no intermediary nor a change of religious identity to be saved, to be with the One God at the End of Days.

That being said, the early Jewish concept of a Noahide who obeys the seven prescribed laws represents an ancient theological legitimization of what today we call religious pluralism. Going one step further, the Noahide laws give legitimacy to pluralism because they firmly place pluralism within the will of God; they are a God-given doctrine of faith with all its caveats and limitations. If this is so, and I believe it is, it means that 1800 years ago rabbis were theologically affirming the value of non-Jewish religions.

And those same rabbis early recognized what is so apparent today: there will always be a wide spectrum of religious expressions, beliefs, and thoughts in God's world. Sadly, we have through the centuries tried many terrible ways to eliminate that God-ordained diversity. For some groups, it meant simply praying for the conversion of the "other." In other cases, it meant more than pious prayers. It meant forced

conversions, coercion, manipulation, expulsion, and worse.

And as every Jew keenly knows, throughout the past two centuries some Christians have trained their full arsenal of temporal and spiritual weapons upon the Jews. This assault upon Jews and Judaism on the part of Christians has frequently included the odious "teaching of contempt" by which the Jewish people and their religion were abased and attacked.

But to no avail. Religious diversity has endured; indeed, it has grown in scope and richness.

It is, after all these years, at last time to come to terms with religious diversity, and to cease all attempts to move Jews away from their traditional faith. Well publicized denominational resolutions, academic courses of instruction aimed at "evangelizing" Jews, and active campaigns of conversion that target Jews or any other group fly in the face of a God-ordained diversity that exists among God's children.

In this paper I have offered a starting place for developing a coherent Jewish theology of pluralism. I urge my Jewish sisters and brothers to move further in this quest. The concepts of the universal and the particular combined with the Noahide principles offer starting points, and are certainly not the end of the discussion, I also urge my Christian colleagues to go and do likewise.

We have tried everything but religious pluralism in the past, and in so doing we have inflicted terrible suffering upon those who do not

share our faith. Because of this wretched record, just perhaps, we can finally understand that religious pluralism might be the will of the God whom we all worship.

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