

Reflections on the Possibilities of Interfaith Communication in our Day

Tamar Ross

Abstract: An examination of approaches to interfaith discussion with its long judgmental history of bitterness and strife that preclude tolerance and legitimate difference. While some believe that constructive interfaith dialogue is possible simply when the representatives of various faiths agree to listen to each other empathetically and understand the Other in his own terms, the author contends that this is insufficient when dealing with religions bearing claims to absolute truths. The solution lies in a more subtle understanding of the theological import of such claims.

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Having lived as an Orthodox Jewess all my life, I have not had the privilege of many ecumenical experiences. A life of *halakhab* is a life designed to delineate Jewish distinctiveness and set up barriers between ourselves and the rest of the world.

Two incidents that could qualify as ecumenical, however, do stick to my mind. One was occasioned by the birth of my first son in Jerusalem. The conditions at that time for giving birth in Israeli hospitals were quite primitive—none of the sophisticated midwifery and breathing exercises in private rooms that is common today. So there I was in a roomful of 16 women partitioned off simply by flimsy curtains, going through various stages of labor, each calling out to God for help in her native religious tongue—Allah, Jesus, or *Teiere Tate*. No woman in that state was in the mood to be picky about religious particulars. There we were all in this together, sympathizing to the extent we could. When we eventually delivered and spent the next few days in the maternity ward, stripped of our distinctive headgear or other garb down to the same identical nightgowns, all happily holding and nursing our babies, a tremendous feeling of sisterhood and religious bliss united us. Only when the variously dressed husbands came to visit did we feel the estranging constraints of the traditions that set us apart.

The second incident took place years later when I was on sabbatical in the department of Judaic Studies at the

University of Memphis, and made the acquaintance of the person appointed to serve as computer assistant of our departmental office. He was a young and extremely refined exchange student from India, the son of academically trained parents high up in the medical profession. To my amazement I learned during my first conversation with him that he had brought along his personal idol with him to the States, and that in his parents' home in India, they had a special room set up for worship of the family icons. This was my first meeting with a genuine idol worshipper, and nothing about him tallied with anything I had ever come to associate with paganism through my study of Torah. When I sounded him out as to how he, such a well-educated and refined young man, could possibly be engaged in so primitive a practice, the sophisticated explanations he gave me for his relationship to idols sounded disturbingly similar to various rationales offered in Jewish tradition for the holiness of physical sites such as the Wailing Wall or the graves of saints.

These two incidents corroborated for me a sense I have long harbored that all religions when approached on the lowest or crudest common denominator of brute feeling have much in common, as they also do on the highest level of theological sophistication. It sometimes seems as if it is only on the very broad intermediate realm of particularistic dogma and language that we are set apart. Indeed this realm is critical to the religious life. Bereft

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of particularistic formulations and rituals, our vague religious sentiments and faith orientations are generally short-lived and lacking of substance. Since it seems that most people cannot do without the distinctive particularities of their unique cult and creed, these do have religious significance, which we ignore at our peril. For this reason, there certainly is merit to the criticisms directed against the universalistic innocence of the rationalist theists of the Emancipation era, who came very close to Deism in their belittling of the importance of the methods of worship established by institutional religion.¹ This critique rests on the sound argument that vital religious activity is conducted on just that intermediate plain.

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But it is precisely because I recognize the important influence of organized religion that I cannot share in the optimism of those who, despite their reservations about universalistic trends, nevertheless believe that diminishing the obstacle to interreligious communication posed by particularism is simply a matter of a reasonable measure of decency and sincere good will. In their opinion, standing ready to listen empathetically to the unfamiliar “Other,” sincerely aiming to understand him on his own terms, serves as a sufficient antidote to the divisive influence of religious sectarianism. We are especially likely to succeed, they believe, if we proceed from a personal stance of genuine humility and absolute trust in God. My skepticism stems from recognition that the principal difficulty we confront is not particularism *per se*, but the fact that particularistic religions often speak in morally reprehensible terms of triumphalism, exclusivism and demonizing of the other.

Make no mistake: the issue here is not a formal one of good manners and clean language. It is rather the fact that the very health of any religion which claims to possess ultimate truths seems to demand that it not be divorced from the passion that fuels such denigrating formulations. What complicates matters further is that in the inner terms of these religions such talk cannot be passed off as merely an unfortunate accretion to the core principles of the religion that are still “pure” and universalistic. The difficulty here lies in the fact that these same offensive terms that foster unethical attitudes and conduct toward religious outsiders are often embedded in forms and contexts that are integral to the belief system itself. Alongside the notion that all human beings were created equally in the image of God, the model of holy wars, favorite sons, and stereotypical divisions between the good guys and the bad guys are drawn—at least within the monotheistic tradition—from our foundational texts. As such these images militate against more nuanced or tolerant views of multiple religious expression.

So what we are facing ultimately is a theological, and not merely a moral, problem. In this context, the problem cannot be resolved simply through good intentions and an all around agreement to abandon accounts with the past. Since even some of the most negative aspects of particularism are part and parcel of the hallowed tradition, their expression poses a genuine impediment to any project of repentance and rebuilding. Such an obstacle cannot be sidestepped simply on the behavioral level without first being tackled directly in terms of the theology that forms its base. For this reason, ecumenical experience allowing us both to affect as well as to be affected by others is not just a question of good will. It also requires confronting the significance of our religious rhetoric, especially those statements that glorify our way of approaching God as against that of others as a matter of principle.

¹ Although Moses Mendelssohn exemplifies such theists, he nevertheless saw the Torah as a book of statutes that God revealed to the nation of Israel, embodying a unique way of life that simultaneously reflects the rational truths apparent to all humanity together with Israel’s unique, historical experience. He most likely was disappointed by Lessing’s exclusive emphasis on universalism and deprecation of the specifically Jewish way of life.

One way out of this dilemma is open to those who adopt an evolutionary religious view, along the lines of Rabbi A. I. Kook or the Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin. This position enables religious persons to regard the teachings of their canonical texts as necessary but only preliminary starting points for the development of higher formulations of the religious impulse.² Such a stance, which tends to draw analogies from its theological understanding of God as an entity continually bringing new possibilities into being to the developmental nature of His revelation, can generate promising new suggestions of ways of relating to the “Other” that are worthy of adoption. In the ancient world justice may have required war-like

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confrontations between believers of various religions, but in our day we are happily permitted to progress to a point beyond those norms.³ This move, however, cannot by itself fully resolve the ecumenical conundrum, for it continues to leave us under the residual influence of the early formulations, which we encounter daily in our worship and study. To be truly effective, a theology conducive to inter-religious communication must give rise either to

conscious distancing from the literal meaning of language, or to intuitive communion with the gut experience to which it leads. But since most of us do not spend all our times in academia or in delivery wards, something more tangible is required in order to ensure freedom from the more harmful effects of our particularistic binds.

From the perspective of Judaism, it appears that the most concrete solution can be found in the sobriety and remedial effects of legal circumventions. When legal experts are given compelling circumstances and a supportive interpretive tradition, these often serve as a moderating influence in situations where a literal understanding of religious statements is likely to produce dangerous or inhumane results. Thus, for example, when halakhic authorities encounter norms that are blatantly immoral with respect to members of other religions, they sometimes adopt a “never-never” attitude towards such prescriptions as something to be reserved for the far-removed eschatological future, when true Jewish life will merit the proper conditions of power, virtue, and so forth. In this way, the pragmatic legal argument permits the community of believers to refrain from carrying out a religious command that appears to them to make no sense. One example of this process is the halakhic argument adduced by Rav Kook for setting aside, in his day, the commandment to admonish non-believers,⁴ and his reliance in this regard on R. Simeon bar Yohai’s, comment, in the *Yerushalmi*, that he “rejoiced over the

² Examples of this tendency in Rav Kook include his reservations regarding the view of religious worship as a matter of servitude (*Arpelei Tobar*, 44); or the Torah as a corpus of heteronomous commands externally imposed on man and contrary to his inner impulse (*Orot Ha-Emunah*, 25, 66–67); the Torah’s acceptance of the institution of slavery (*Iggerot Ra’AYaH* 1:103–104) and of the killing of animals (*Tallelei Orot*, Chapter 8; *Afiqim Ba-Negev*, Chapter 6); and the monotheistic understanding of God, in contrast to the pantheistic (*Orot Ha-Qodesh* 2:399–401). Also pertinent here is an aspect of what is termed “process theology,” which applies the thinking of Alfred North Whitehead (a British philosopher who spent his later years in the United States) in order to develop the concept of a God that is not an absolute entity but one that comes into existence through the world and its creative potential. Within Judaism, the kabbalistic tradition, especially its Lurianic component, adopted similar motifs, which infer by analogy from God’s constantly evolving nature the dynamic nature of the Torah as well, which reveals, in the course of history, the infinite layers of God Himself.

³ An instance of this course of reasoning in Rav Kook’s writings: “We left world politics by force of circumstance that (nevertheless) contains an inner desire, until a fortunate time will come, when it will be possible to conduct a nation without wickedness and barbarism—this is the time we hope for. It is understood that in order to achieve this, we must awaken with all of our powers to use all the media that time makes available ... However, the delay is a necessary one; we were repulsed by the awful sins of conducting a nation in an evil time. (*Orot, Ha-Milhamah*, 14; translation by Bezalel Naor, *Orot* [Aronson: Northvale, 1993], p.96).

⁴ *Iggerot Ra’AYaH*, 1:21—“In order to carry out national governance as a practical matter, it is necessary that all the forces of the nation be as complete as possible.”

suspension of the laws in Israel in his day, for we are not wise enough to judge.”⁵ Another instance is circumvention of the Biblical injunction to wipe out every last remnant of Amalek, which is grounded on the premise that Sennacherib intermingled all the nations, thereby rendering it impossible for us to determine who are the genuine descendants of Amalek.⁶ Even the invocation of broad procedural principles, such as the obligation to avoid offending the Other “lest it generate hatred” or lest it cause “desecration of God’s name,” is more the expression of a moral concern that seeks to question a traditional norm without wreaking havoc, than the mere pragmatic assessment that it appears to be at first blush.⁷ Yet even these solutions relate only to how we act in relation to rival religions on the practical level, without touching upon deeper layers of respect and esteem.

For this reason I think it would be unfair to extend the criticisms raised against the naivete of deist universalism to attempts of the sort made by philosophers of religion such as John Hick to salvage a kernel of common spirituality out of its various particularistic prisms.⁸ Hick’s move of regarding particularistic truth claims metaphorically or mythically as alternative symbolic articulations of a common inner experience deserves to be more charitably regarded as a valiant effort at dealing with the harmful effects of morally problematic religious beliefs on the attitudinal level as well. According to this approach, the truth formulations of all religions could be viewed as incomplete attempts at expressing the ineffable, i.e.

“truths” only in a very weak sense of the term. Thus derogatory portrayals of rival religions cannot be understood as propositional statements to be measured primarily in terms of their literal import. It would perhaps be more accurate to relate to such portrayals as imperfect expression of the subjective feeling we all nurture regarding the urgency and importance of our particular method of worship in the eyes of God.

Another possible move is to relate to the function of various expressions of particularism, especially when clothed in garb offensive to other forms of religious worship, as instrumental rather than expressive. In other words, instead of viewing these statements as the necessarily imperfect products of religious expression, this approach will regard them as constitutive tools whose function is to indirectly shape a particular faith community’s identity and self-image, galvanize their parochial loyalties, or other such anthropological exercises. Obviously, this concept involves contentions that extend far beyond the issue of interfaith dialogue, touching upon the meaning of doctrine in general in an age characterized by the loss of faith in foundational truths.⁹ In any case, even when not immediately apparent, in its theological application such an approach is motivated by the need to resolve anomalies and bridge the inevitable gaps that develop between fixed dogmas and formulas on the one hand, and our contemporary perceptions of reality on the other, and to overcome the intellectual and religious traumas which develop in their wake.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For examples of halakhic usage of this type of escape clause, see Avi Sagi, *Judaism: Between Religion and Morality* [Heb.] (*Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’ubad*, 1988), Chapter 10: “The Punishment of Amalek: How the Jewish Tradition Confronted the Issue and the Standing of Morality in the Jewish Tradition,” p. 219.

⁷ For one pertinent example of this phenomenon, see Rabbi I. J. Untermann, “‘The Ways of Peace’ and Their Definition” [Heb.], *Qol Torah* (Nisan 5726); and Michael Farbowitz, “The Responsibility of the Jewish Physician in Jewish Law,” *The Pharos* (Spring 1994), pp. 28–33.

⁸ I refer here to the comments of the Christian theologian Prof. Franz Josef van Beeck, in his presentation at the conference in honor of the Pope’s visit. For Hick’s views, see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁹ For clarification of the intellectual underpinnings of this approach, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

According to the instrumentalist approach, religious statements are idioms for construing reality and ordering life rather than conveying what is already there; they are statements *leading to* rather than *coming from*.¹⁰ On this view, the function of religious discourse is much more oblique than that of normal informative communication; it strives to create a certain mindset, via myth and drama, which will be conducive to a religious experience that may often be far removed or even contradictory to its declared moral purpose. Because the way such language works upon us is never straightforward, transparent and predictable, the project of evaluating its effectiveness could lead to conclusions that appear convoluted and even paradoxical. Exclusionary particularism directed to God may conceivably be the shortest road to universalism.¹¹ Delusions of grandeur may be required to achieve ultimate humility. Demonization of the other may be the grammar necessary, under certain circumstances, for developing a healthy sense of self. To complicate matters further we must bear in mind that much of the force of any religious system stems from the legacies of its past. Moreover, even if it were possible to eradicate previous traditions and start building a “clean” religious slate from scratch, no system can then be guaranteed as suitable for all times. It must take account of its prior identities and make use of the potential contribution of hermeneutics in overcoming discrepancies and contradictions.

Alongside the relative merits of their specific contributions to muting the harmful effect of problematic texts that on the face of it work against universal harmony, the choice between the various interpretive approaches that I have enumerated can have a much more profound and

far-reaching impact on the role and very possibility of ecumenical discussion. As long as religious truth statements are understood simply as propositional statements of objective reality, ecumenical discussion cannot really veer away from the contentious atmosphere of the disputations of medieval times. If my religion is absolutely true, then yours is absolutely false, and I must be fully committed to battling your falsehood, tolerating it at the very best out of prudential considerations.¹² However, if I follow Hick and adopt the line that all religions are diverse symbolic objectifications of the same basic spiritual experience and intimation of Ultimate Being, then my exposure to any rival religion can teach me something about our common core, thus increasing the potential for correction and refinement of my own particular truth. In that event, interfaith encounters become mutually enriching and the existence of diverse religious expressions mandates cooperation and mutual respect.

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Although this view is a significant step in the ecumenical direction, it cannot negate the tendency of bearers of a particular religion to view the multifarious religious expressions outside of their own as merely the lower levels of a graduating scale. True, all religions have some truth to them, we might say, but these can still be

¹⁰ For a formulation of a similar stance with respect to the meaning of religious doctrines, see Howard Wettstein. 1997. *Doctrine and Philosophy* 14/4, 428.

¹¹ This insight, which appears in the writings of Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi as an apologetic for the lowly state of the Jewish nation in his time, is a principal motif in the teachings of Rav Kook, who uses it in a more affirmative and positive manner not as an excuse for Jewish suffering but as a defense for their exclusionism.

¹² As one contemporary philosopher has put it: “If one shares the position, it makes no sense to speak of tolerating it, and if one disagrees with it, then one is committed to its repudiation.” P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, (London: Methuen, 1974), Chapter 4, “The Limits of Toleration,” p. 47.

positioned hierarchically in terms of their relative worth, for some expressions are more successful than others in leading to the ethical norms which are the common ideal of all the great religious traditions.¹³ On this view, the more inclusive a religion is of the truths of others, the greater its value and also its ability to co-exist with the rest.¹⁴ It is important to recognize that this residual vestige of exclusivism imposes certain limits on genuine ecumenism, since any religion categorized under the rubric of another one will not appreciate the distortion and relativising of its views in that context.

On the other hand, the understanding of religious truth statements as instrumental rather than expressive places ecumenical discussion in another context that is both less contentious and less urgent at the same time. Because we are now talking of religions as different cultural–linguistic systems, they are incommensurable, and cannot even be graded hierarchically as part of a common effort. Ecumenism here is valuable only in the sense that we learn from others the different scenery that can be glimpsed when using different maps for the spiritual terrain, but these are not maps that can be used simultaneously as correctives to our own. The varieties of religious particularism teach us the infinite range of possibilities open to the human spirit, rather than the wealth of the

one track to be taken by all. This understanding might appear as a great watering down of traditional religious intensity, replacing zealotry with a more moderate, relaxed mindset.

Yet given its great practical advantages in lowering the level of contentiousness, hatred, and even brutality associated with traditional religious polemics, believers may see the ability to understand religious statements in this manner as an act of Providence, perhaps the ultimate gift of God to a post-modernist age.

Then again, such an approach may be merely a preamble for the great day referred to by the prophet Zekhariah, when all nations will be gathered in Jerusalem. “On that day, God will be One and His Name will be One.”¹⁵ The *midrash* takes that unity between God and His Name to indicate a future state of affairs in which even the symbolic representation of God will be seen uniformly by all. However, even the instrumentalist interpreter who continues to remain faithful to the prophetic tradition is still left with the possibility of understanding the significance of this statement as well to be attitudinal rather than simply descriptive.

¹³ Hick, *op. cit.*, pp. 316–342.

¹⁴ This move is characteristic of Rav Kook’s religious tolerance, to the extent that it exists. See, for example, *Igrot Ra’AYaH*, 1:142-143; *Orot Ha-wQodesh*, 2:488–489. On his approach to tolerance in general, based on that same concept of truth, see my “Between Metaphysical and Liberal Pluralism: A Reappraisal of Rabbi A.I. Kook’s Espousal of Toleration,” *AJS Review* 21:1 (1996), pp. 61–110.

¹⁵ Zekhariah, 14.