

Judaism and Other Religions

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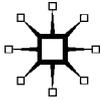
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Judaism and Other Religions

Models of Understanding

Alan Brill

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JUDAISM AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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P R E F A C E

In 2001, the Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevi published his award-winning book *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*. The book describes his important spiritual journey as a religious Jew into the worlds of Christianity and Islam in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Halevi joined in prayers and meditations in mosques and monasteries, in an attempt to experience their devotional lives and thereby create a religious language of reconciliation among the three monotheistic faiths. His quest for reconciliation was an attempt to move beyond the fear and hatred of gentiles inherited from having been raised in a Holocaust survivor household in Brooklyn. This fear had originally led him to the right-wing politics of a Jewish defense against the non-Jewish world as "Never Again." Many of his contemporaries continued their journey by supporting right-wing rhetoric upon moving to Israel. Halevi left his comfort zone to determine whether religion can be a source of peace and reconciliation.

My journey was not as dramatic as Halevi's. I, too, was raised in the survivor community, and as I tell people, the people in *Maus* were my neighbors and family friends. While I imbibed many of the same attitudes toward gentiles as Yossi Klein Halevi, my greater exposure to the broader world of the era, and my awareness of being part of the vast tapestry of different urban-ethnic groups in New York tempered this fear. A county away in Queens, I played with neighbors who made up the multiethnic and multireligious kaleidoscope of New York, and I imbibed the diversity of American religion. I accepted the xenophobia of the older generation as a passing phenomenon of an immigrant community similar to speaking Yiddish, eating *petcha*, or warding off the evil eye. As in the case of Yossi Klein Halevi, the state of Israel served as a comfort zone for these encounters, in that Christianity in Israel is

a small, somewhat quaint minority religion, neither to be feared nor overwhelmed by its presence.

My interest in theology and Hasidic thought led me to choose mysticism as a field of study, bringing me to doctoral studies at Fordham University, a Jesuit institution. During my theological studies, I was accepted socially and made to feel comfortable as a student in the theology program due to the immense accomplishments of the Jewish-Christian encounter. Unlike Yossi Klein Halevi, I did not have to leave my comfort zone. Nor did I even need a special visa to enter a foreign territory where one remains conscious of one's temporary status. I was accepted as an ordinary student along with the other non-Catholics, including Evangelicals, Mennonites, Greek Orthodox, and other Jewish students. The courses included discussion on the possibilities of empirical comparisons between religions and the similarities of spiritual paths. My doctoral advisor, Ewert Cousins, garnered a cadre of students who listened eagerly to his intellectual and spiritual autobiography, which took leaps over the chasms between different spiritual worlds. Under his editorial guidance, the *Classics of Western Spirituality* made the category of spirituality, then fresh and exciting but now over-used, a source of religious encounter. For me, mysticism and knowledge of the higher realms drowned out, at the time, almost any social concerns or encounter implications.

I entered the field of interfaith encounters long after the great strides made in *Nostrae Aetate*, and during the time of trajectories set into motion as John Paul II acknowledged Judaism as a living faith, recognized the Holocaust, and finally made his historic official visit to the state of Israel. The main topic of discussion of the era was the difference in terminology between reconciliation and *teshuvah* (return or repentance). In this context, I met several of my current departmental colleagues who were involved in elucidating these differences. Encounter at this point was no longer based on the liberating sense of dialogue and brotherhood of the 1960s. Now, it was complex activity, more academic and more informal, more concerned with protecting the interests of world Jewry and the need for specific local ethnic encounters, a more cautious and calculated encounter. The original participants of the early 1960s were passing away, including my own teacher Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, who originally brought me into the interfaith discussions. At this point, there was a greater divergence between the perspective of the academy and those who represented specific religious traditions than in the original heady days of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

As heir of the latter half of the twentieth century, I am the one explaining contemporary Christian theology to Christians, rather than the one who it needs to be explained.. Instead of tentatively learning to understand Christianity, I am the one helping Christians catch allusions to Christian classics and compare Church documents. The Christians I encounter are comfortable and knowledgeable about Jews; most have attended a synagogue service, and many go out of their way to wish me greetings before Jewish holidays. The original obstacles to a Jewish-Christian encounter seem remote when one teaches in a department that situates early Christianity in a Jewish context, teaches Christian students to read rabbinic Hebrew, and grants certificates in Holocaust studies to Christian students.

When I read accounts of Jews involved in interfaith work, even those only two decades my senior, I come across their straining personal justifications as to why they read Christian theologians. In contrast, while in a Jewish college, I read the Lutheran classics that were so dear, at the time, to modern Orthodox thinkers. Then, as part of a seemingly, at the time, natural progression, I expanded the canon to include Rahner, Moltmann, Ratzinger, Lindbeck, and many other theologians. The wisdom contained in these works did not need justification. Other religions and their theologies do not appear to be an incomprehensible realm. I have taught Orthodox Jewish students who had expressed a natural “sacred envy” for Christian or Buddhist practice and who are comfortable comparing, as a mental experiment, their practice to those of other faiths. Some of my students have even entered the field professionally, knowing in advance the academic training they will need. Yet when I read the writings of my senior colleagues, I am amazed as they point out how the liturgical and ritual world of Christianity remains entirely impenetrable to them, even after years of study and encounter.

The sources in this book were collected over decades, but my writing started at the June 2001 International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) meeting in New York. At the meeting, one of the Jewish presenters warned against the dangers of Cardinal Ratzinger’s *Dominus Iesus*. The presenter pointed out how the Christian God differs from the Jewish God, and he voiced his rejection of the recent publication of *Dabru Emet* (a statement made in 2000 by a group of Jewish scholars that stresses the common ground of Judaism and Christianity), which stated that Jews and Christians worship the same God. In contrast, Cardinal Kasper, who attended the meeting, immediately explained the language of *Dominus Iesus* based on traditional inclusivism theology. After the talk, I had a conversation with two

colleagues, Rabbi Michael Signer, of blessed memory, one of the drafters of *Dabru Emet*, and Prof. Lawrence Schifman, who opposed the document. I suggested that *Dabru Emet* could have been formulated not in terms of an either/or dichotomy of a same or different God, but as a qualified statement reflecting some of the traditional Jewish texts. At this point, I started to point out subtleties and distinctions that could have been added to the first paragraph of *Dabru Emet* to make the statement closer to the inclusivist or universal statements of other texts. I also noted that the Catholic encounter partners use a language of inclusivism and not pluralism, so an emended document would have more weight in a traditional context. Both of my colleagues were intrigued by the idea, yet were unconvinced, and I proceeded to write up my first thoughts.

Then, and with great urgency after the tragic events of 9/11, there was an awakening to the issues concerning encounter with other religions, and to the special problems in an era of globalization. Many of those involved in interfaith encounter, myself included, were asked to give presentations on the seeming clash of civilizations and the new role that religion played in our lives. The *New York Times* began a series of articles on the role of religion in Islamic countries; it also began to openly view the role of Evangelicals in the United States and discuss the religious backdrop to current events and political agendas. Those of us in interfaith encounter were required to explain the importance of moderate positions and also to serve as moderate voices. The challenge is to discuss the difficulties practically, historically, and textually in implementing moderate positions, even those positions with long pedigrees and cherished stature. Rather than falling into a sharp dichotomy between contemporary pluralism and absolute fundamentalism, moderate positions tend to use texts from former ages to create a more inclusive position without diminishing allegiance to religion. Those years left many people confused about the rise of religion during the previous twenty years. From 2001 through 2005 there was a need for a positive message to counterbalance the anxiety that many felt, and the need for data or cultural buoys that would help make sense of current events.

After 9/11 one thing was certain, the expectation that members of diverse religions would meet each other as liberal secular thinkers and place their religion aside was no longer a possibility. To identify the public sphere with liberalism devoid of religion was both an insult to religion and an obstacle to fruitful discussions. I do not necessarily reject liberalism or a public sphere devoid of religion, but there was a

change. Centers of religion and culture, religion and media, religion and the public sphere began to open in order to discuss this cultural shift.

With others who take a moderate position based on classic texts, this collection has served me in many contemporary discussions. This work started as a florilegium—a collection of sources—but with the encouragement of my colleagues, the bouquet of erudition became a book. The starting categories were exclusivist, pluralist, and inclusivist, and these subdivided over time. Finally, the bouquet of sources needed to be set in a vase. Public talks needed contemporary points as well as texts, hence the surrounding chapters.

In 2003, a first draft was presented at the “Fifth Academic Meeting between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity” held in Thessaloniki, Greece. In 2004, the World Jewish Congress invited a select group of Catholic Cardinals to New York, and at that gathering the core of chapters two through five were given as a paper. Shortly afterward, a prematurely edited transcript of the speech “Judaism and Other Religions: An Orthodox Perspective” was available on the website of the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning. In 2005, the World Jewish Congress invited a different group of Cardinals, to whom I presented a draft of the last chapter of this book. The same year, Alon Goshen-Gottstein and the Elijah Institute held a conference gracefully hosted by Marc Shapiro at the University of Scranton, which offered me the extraordinary opportunity to deliver the thesis before many of the best Jewish authors in the field without the usual press coverage. In September 2005, I attended a conference in Rome on the ramifications of *Nostrae Aetate* forty years later. At that conference, I presented a version of the material geared for that occasion. Finally, I presented on Judaism and Eastern religions at Florida International University. Through my current circuit of community lectures, I have gained further clarification of my own work.

Because this book grew out of encounters between Catholics and Jews and between Jews and Jews, it became clear that it needed to be adjusted to apply to other groups, such as Muslims, Evangelicals, and Hindus. I was quite gratified to learn that a group of Muslims I met in Seville at the World Congress of Rabbis and Imams for Peace had read my online article about Judaism and other religions. They felt at home translating their own terms into my schema of Jewish positions. The sources were similarly useful when I received in my home a contingent of Israeli Arab educators from Al-Kasami College in Baqa El Gharbia. Nevertheless, I know some of the framing issues would change if geared

specifically for a Jewish-Muslim encounter, but this can be easily done since many of the Jewish texts were originally written in Arabic about Islam of which they were intimately aware. Finally, as I finish this volume, I have just met with Imams from Iraq brought by the U.S. State Department, an opening created by the new administration. For them, the question of how to seek their own moderate positions, especially neglected medieval positions, is the only route to appreciating religious difference that they are comfortable following.

Most Jews are not remotely aware of the texts in this volume. When interfaith positions began to be classified as inclusivist, exclusivist, and pluralist in the 1980s, categories that became the professional terminology in the 1990s, there should have been a Jewish compilation of theological opinions about other religions to complement the Christian versions. But alas, most Jewish works concentrated on personal theories, or debated the virtues of dialogue, thereby neglecting their own internal theological self-formulation. Many proceeded from a projected medieval exclusivism to an affirmation of pluralism, even when they really meant inclusivism or universalism. And many, as a reaction, ran headlong from this pluralism into new forms of exclusivism.

I consider this volume a necessary tool for a serious discussion of the attitude of Judaism toward other religions. This book is not about dialogue, it is about Jews knowing their own sources. It is not enough to cite only the inclusivist position of Maimonides or the halakhic leniency of Rabbenu Tam, and then use them as a justification for pluralism, or conversely use them as a justification for exclusivism. The gamut of Jewish texts cannot be aligned in a single direction or single valence. We are far from any concluding point and all apparent conclusions in this work remain open to discussion. I would be pleased if this work produced follow-up volumes weighing the material. The various opinions need to be formulated and evaluated. Even when accepted, the positions need translation into modern religious categories.

I cast my net wide in my collection in order to show the diversity of the materials. For some, eager to settle on a contemporary position, my net might be much too wide. To those who want to have a fixed conclusion, consider the book a resource tool for teaching historical opinions and formulating current opinions. Others will object to my inclusion of statements from Jewish texts that demonize other religions, and they will argue that these statements should not be aired in public. It should be noted that almost every negative statement is already easily accessible on the web, readily available for all to see. In today's world of readily available information, little religious doctrine can remain secret. These

texts are already out there and there is nothing to be gained by hiding from them. It is important to respond to these questionable texts. Still other readers will object to my specific selection of texts, arguing for texts they consider normative or that they accept. Others may find most of these texts illiberal or superseded in the modern age. To these latter readers, I say that these texts still frame many of the traditional discussions, and their points of view are still held by more people than those who accept some of the liberal positions. My book reflects an Orthodox training and erudition, but it is not limited to Orthodox thinkers. All thinkers who contribute to the discussion are included.

A pluralist author who writes a theology of other religions needs to give a fair presentation of the exclusivist position, and an exclusivist author needs to give a fair presentation of the pluralist position. They should not merely shout names at each other across a fence: fundamentalist, relativist, obscurantist, heretic, immoral, nihilist. Those disturbed about the inclusion of the negative portrayals of gentiles will probably argue that I want to destroy the tradition. On the other hand, those readers upset by my inclusion of a vast array of medieval texts rather than starting with the contemporary pluralists will probably think that I am a fundamentalist rallying against liberalism. My goal was to collect the original texts because I am convinced that any attempt to create contemporary theologies before the groundwork is done will not answer the basic questions.

Why do I still use the outdated term of theologies of other religions, implying that Judaism is judging the world? I can speak from personal experience, as someone who formerly taught at a Jewish college that would not and could not entertain creating a religion department, and who currently teaches in a college that does have a religion department, carved within recent memory from the theology department, but still refers within the required courses to “the other religions.” I can assert that the basic questions still need to be addressed from a traditional position. Many believers are still trying to formulate their positions in a nonrestrictive way. If interfaith encounter is to change people then it has to start with acknowledging and working to change the contemporary lack of clarity.

I am more than surprised at frequent interfaith encounters where the Catholic speaks from the official Church teachings, the Muslim speaks from traditional teachings, and the Jewish representative addresses the assembled from the general perspective of comparative religion, politics, or anthropology. There need to be Jewish theologies of other religions.

Many authors who work in interfaith relations divide their books into two different books. The first book presents the general interfaith categories of inclusive, exclusive, and pluralistic thought. The second volume gives the specifics of how faith relates to the specifics of other religions. In keeping with that approach, there will be a follow-up volume to this book called *Judaism and World Religions*, which will deal with specifics of how Judaism relates to Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It will deal with the important topics of covenant theology, comparative religion, and the ability to compare religions. It will discuss the important thinkers that are conspicuous by their absence in this work: Rosenzweig, Baeck, Herberg, Heschel, Soloveitchik, Wyschogrod, Novak, Levinson, Neusner, and Levinas.

Currently, I occupy a position that was named in honor of Sister Rose Thering, a feisty nun who was instrumental in an account of Jewish-Christian relations in many ways—examining how Judaism is taught in American Catholic schools, instrumental in instituting the first state-mandated Holocaust curriculum requirement, and educating Catholics about the need to learn about and respect Judaism. What we say on interfaith topics does matter; it does lead to greater understanding, and it leads to practical change.

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