

Shifting Paradigms in Jewish View of Other Faiths

by

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Introduction

In his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Charles Kimball cautioned on the “major warning signs of corruption in religion that invariably lead to violence and evil in the world.”¹ His conclusion is that faith communities need to establish what he terms as an “inclusive faith rooted in tradition”² by formulating “new paradigms, new ways of understanding and living out [their] particularity in the midst of pluralism”³ while remaining true to their tradition’s authentic sources.

It is with this idea in mind that I am particularly interested how this process has taken place within Judaism, the oldest of the three Abrahamic faiths and the first to achieve distinctive forms and beliefs. For twenty-five hundred years, Jews have “constituted subcultures in the midst of other and larger cultures”⁴ while simultaneously struggling to maintain Jewish identity and existence. With present adjustments Muslims are making as minorities in western societies, I believe that we can draw many lessons from Judaism’s early and long experience of being a minority group in other cultures and having to formulate its beliefs and practices in the face of challenges from other cultures and religions.

In this paper, I aim to identify paradigm shifts within Jewish thought as a result of the changing socio-historical contexts and the concomitant evolution in the interpretation of Jewish biblical and traditional sources. Within the scope of this paper, I will trace the transformative process beginning from medieval up to the modern period by highlighting the views of selected Jewish medieval and modern scholars on the Judaic position of other religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. However, the major part of my paper will be devoted to discussing the more contemporary ideas of Jewish thinkers like Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Rabbi David Hartman and to a lesser extent, the Jewish Renewal Movement.

¹ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2002), 186.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 189.

⁴ Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (New York: Maryknoll, 1985), 1.

Socio-Historical Context

Jewish views of other religions have always been closely intertwined with the fortunes of the Jewish people within a particular epoch. Interpretation of Jewish biblical scriptures as well as traditional texts like the Talmud has been heavily influenced by the changing Jewish lenses in how they viewed their situation as well as the surrounding people who affect them. According to Coward, exclusivistic interpretations emerged in early traditional sources during the end of the Babylonian exile and the return to Palestine⁵. This was largely due to the different living experience of Jews among Gentiles as compared to those of the pre-exilic period. An intense sense of “religious separation”⁶ was nurtured and emphasized in order, to “help the demoralized struggling community of those who had returned to Palestine to reestablish their identity and rebuild Jerusalem.”⁷

A shift in thinking arose when subsequent generations of Jews lived under the hegemony of a more dominant religious and cultural context, whether Christendom or the Islamic Caliphate. This is alluded to by Rabbi David Novak who claims that “all these traditional sources were formulated in a medieval context in which Judaism had to ensure its survival in a religious world that was in almost every way Christian (or Muslim).”⁸ The issue of survival also featured in Jewish adaptation to European and American societies during and after the Enlightenment period, where, in the process, Jewish views of Christianity underwent significant transformations.

In recent times, the two major events in Jewish contemporary history: the Holocaust and the founding of State of Israel have become critical points in the transformation of Jewish thought. The sense of vulnerability and anxiety continues to be the essential preoccupation of the Jewish people throughout the passage of Jewish history.⁹

Biblical and Traditional Sources

In this paper, I shall focus on three key concepts within the Hebrew scriptures that are critical in subsequent formulations of Jewish thinking on other faiths. They are: 1) creation of humankind in the image of God, 2) God’s covenantal relationship with humankind, and 3) the biblical rejection of idol worship.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue : A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4.

⁹ Jonathan Magonet, *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 11.

1. Creation of Humankind in the Image of God

According to the Jerusalem Talmud¹⁰, the central core teaching of Judaism is that humankind is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; 5:1; 9:6). This means that as an image of God, humankind has “godlike”¹¹ capacities and serves as partners with God in bringing on the redemption of the world or *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). Humankind is entitled to the recognition of his/her dignities regardless of status, color, gender, race or creed. Any act of disrespect of another human being is considered an act of disrespect to God.

2. God’s Covenantal Relationship with Humankind

The earliest covenantal relationship in biblical scripture or the Noachide covenant is described in Genesis 9:8-17 where after the Flood, God enters into a covenant with Noah, his family, and with every living person and animal. The Noachide covenant is the manifestation of the universal bond between God and humankind. It consists of seven commandments that are binding on both non-Jews and Jews which include refraining from idolatry, murder, blasphemy, incest, theft, the eating of a limb from a living animal and establishing a just court system. The degree to which Jews believe that the Noachide covenant satisfies the moral salvific needs of the non-Jew has varied over the years separating medieval from modern times.

This notion of being committed to God via a covenantal relationship is fundamental to Jewish theology where the earliest experience of the Jewish people began with God’s covenant with Abraham and subsequently, with Moses and David. Coward highlights that “from the Jewish biblical perspective, the various religions may be seen as expressions of relationships obtained between other peoples and God.”¹² Just as the Mosaic covenant is true and authoritative for the Jews, the particular relationship with God will be true and authoritative for other peoples.

3. Biblical Rejection of Idol Worship

The Jewish biblical texts are very strongly opposed to the idolatry of the surrounding people and especially of the previous inhabitants of the land of Israel (Deuteronomy 12:3). Those idolators were portrayed as “a faith that has no validity and of a community that has no dignity; the practitioners are morally unjustified and worthy of annihilation.”¹³ In the *Avodah Zarah*, the tractate of the *Mishnah* dealing with idolatry and the restriction on Jewish relations with idolators, they are “presumed in their normal moral behavior to rob and to be capable of killing innocent people for economic advantage or simply for arbitrary reasons.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Irving Greenberg, “Religion as a Force for Reconciliation,” in *Beyond Violence : Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. James L. Heft, S.M. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 95.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Coward, 2.

¹³ Greenberg, 99.

¹⁴ Ibid., 100.

Almost in a similar denigrating tone, the Talmud says that “you are called Adam [human] but the idolaters are not called Adam [human].”¹⁵

Medieval Perspectives

The rejection of idol worship forms the basis of the view of Jewish medieval thinker, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), on other religions. He views that other religions, like Christianity and Islam, are seen as “human attempts to emulate the Jewish religion by constructing belief structures that like the carved image, were false and idolatrous.”¹⁶ In the early part of his career, Maimonides considered Christianity as a form of polytheism. In his commentary on *Avodah Zarah*, Maimonides makes this categorical statement about Christianity and Christians from the “*halakhic* perspective”¹⁷:

Know that his Christian nation, who advocate the messianic claim, in all their various sects, all of them are idolators. On all their festivals it is forbidden for us to deal with them. And all Torah restrictions pertaining to idolators pertain to them. Sunday is one of their festivals. Therefore, it is forbidden to deal with believers in “the messiah” on Sunday at all in any manner whatsoever; rather, we deal with them as we would deal with any idolators on their festival.¹⁸

Maimonides points to the doctrine of the Trinity and the use of icons in churches¹⁹ which affirm his view that Christianity is idolatrous. Additionally, he also views both Christianity and Islam are in error and distortions of the divine message of the Torah due to the Christian elevation of Jesus above Moses and Islam’s claim of Muhammad’s supercessionism respectively.

However, despite such negative views, Maimonides regards the emergence of Christianity and Islam as a part of God’s wisdom which would pave the way for the spread of Judaism and the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom. Maimonides assigns both Christianity and Islam a role in the process of world redemption:

The teaching of him of Nazareth (Jesus) and of the man of Ishmael (Muhammad) who arose after him help to bring all mankind to perfection, so that they may serve God with one consent. For insofar as the whole world is full of talk of the Messiah, of words of Holy Writ and of the Commandments – these words have spread to the ends of the earth, even if many deny their binding character at the present time. When the Messiah comes all will return from their errors.²⁰

However, about a century later, the Provençal Rabbi Menachem Ha-Meiri (1249-1316) concludes that Christianity, in particular (and Islam, implicitly), cannot be classified as

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Coward, 5.

¹⁷ Rabbi David Hartman, “Judaism Encounters Christianity Anew,” in *Visions of the Other, Jewish and Christian Theologians Assess the Dialogue*, ed. Eugene J. Fisher (New Jersey: Stimulus Book, 1994), 67.

¹⁸ Novak, 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 59

²⁰ Norman Solomon, “Towards a Jewish Theology of Trilateral Dialogue,” in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase (Vermont, Ashgate: 2005), 207.

an idolatrous faith. According to Meiri, “Christianity and Islam are deemed to be practiced by people whose ethics and inner morality have been shaped by the process of becoming civilized by religion.”²¹ Ha-Meiri views that Christians (and Muslims) have a moral code that fully complies with the Noachide laws. Thus, Christians and Muslims are categorized as monotheists, not idolators, whereby, none of the inherited pejorative terminology and categories can be legitimately applied.

Although Ha-Meiri shares Maimonides’s use of the Noachide covenantal framework in defining Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim relations, Maimonides takes it further by insisting that it is not sufficient merely to live an ethical life as outlined by the Noachide Laws. For him, “salvation hinges on the recognition that the laws are divine”²² and it cannot be arrived through natural means. It is also clear for Maimonides that the Noachide covenant is inferior to the Sinai covenant as it is only through Torah that the highest relationship is reached between the human individual and God.

In viewing the two different perspectives, it is worthy to note that both Maimonides and Ha-Meiri lived in different cultural contexts. Maimonides lived his entire life in Muslim societies: in Spain, in North Africa, and, finally, in Egypt. He had better access to knowledge of Islam as compared to Christianity.²³ On the other hand, Ha-Meiri lived as a Jewish refugee from France in the expulsion of 1306²⁴ where there is evidence that during his adult life in Provence, Jews had positive relations with Christians there and were well-treated by them. These differing contexts might have contributed significantly to their different views on Christianity and Islam.

Modern Perspectives

About four centuries after Ha-Meiri, another Jewish thinker, Moses Mendelssohn (1720-1786) built on his ideas of religious tolerance. Unlike Maimonides, Mendelssohn places solidly the concept of the Noachide covenant within the framework of natural religion. Greatly influenced by the principles of Enlightenment rationalism, Mendelssohn asserts that, “once the degree of a people’s enlightenment permits it, all truths that indispensable to mankind’s salvation can be based upon rational insights.”²⁵ Like Ha-Meiri, Mendelssohn argues for a level of religious tolerance based upon the common truths which may be possessed by all people.

In Mendelssohn’s view²⁶, through human rationality, all people can discover universal truths about the nature of God and his activity in the world. Thus, Mendelssohn believes that all religions have the ability to find the reality of God, divine providence and the

²¹ Greenberg, 102.

²² Sandra B. Lubarsky, “Tolerance and Transformation: Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism” (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), 18.

²³ Novak, 57.

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁵ Lubarsky, 20.

²⁶ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Jews, Christians and Religious Pluralism*, vol. 79, Toronto Studies in Theology (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 184.

immortality of the soul. However, for Judaism, being recipients of a divine revelation consisting of ritual and moral law, it is set apart from other faiths, and it serves to move the Jewish nation toward their universal mission for all humanity.

Mendelssohn is significant due to his inclusion of reason and his attendant disregard for Maimonides' requirement that the Noachide code be considered as divinely revealed which marks the "split between the medieval mind and the modern mind."²⁷ However, Novak views that Mendelssohn's vision of Judaism is a "puny defense against the tide of assimilation in the nineteenth century, which could easily make Judaism totally irrelevant."²⁸

Another Jewish thinker, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), however, departs entirely from the Noachide tradition as he sees the importance to speak to other religions with theological respect. His openness is directed exclusively to Christianity, but in this regard he recognizes that Christianity is a revealed religion which has a particular covenantal relationship with God. Rosenzweig's "two covenant"²⁹ theory is a major progression over earlier formulations which utilized the Noachide framework as the sole means of value of all non-Jewish traditions. For this, he is highly regarded for making this breakthrough in Jewish thought to attribute an independent value to Christianity detached from either Judaism or Noachism.

The underlying idea in Rosenzweig's view of Judaism and Christianity is the belief that the Christian faith would ultimately lead to a universal Judaism. Rosenzweig's inclusivist framework reflects "a sympathetic understanding and appreciation of the Christian faith in the unfolding of God's plan for humanity"³⁰. However, in the final analysis, "Rosenzweig subscribed to the conviction that Judaism is the only hope for the world."³¹

It is important to recognize that both Mendelssohn and Rosenzweig grew up in Germany more than a century apart from each other. However, both are equally instrumental in bridging the gap between the closed Jewish community and the larger European society. The impact of modernity has meant that more than ever before, Jews are freely associating with non-Jews. Mendelssohn and Rosenzweig represent major shifts in Jewish thought as they sought for a "common denominator with the prevailing Christian culture."³² Most significantly, modernity has transformed the modern Jewish consciousness on the dangers of idolatry. By this time, idol worship is no longer viewed as a real threat.³³

Contemporary Perspectives

Moving forward to the contemporary period, significant changes have taken place in Jewish thought with the occurrence of the two cataclysmic events in contemporary Jewish

²⁷ Lubarsky, 22.

²⁸ Novak, 19.

²⁹ Lubarsky, 25.

³⁰ Cohn-Sherbok, 239.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Coward, 6.

³³ Ibid., 7.

history – the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. Since 1960, several Jewish thinkers like Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Rabbi David Hartman and Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi of the Jewish Renewal Movement, have emerged to respond to the changing contexts which are immensely different from their intellectual predecessors. Besides the greater contact with a more diverse range of religions and cultures due to globalization, Jewish thinkers have to experience the intra-Jewish dynamics among the spectrum of Jewish orientations whether in the United States or the Jewish diaspora as well as within Israel. Beyond Christianity and Islam, Jewish thinkers are also rethinking their position on non-monotheistic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

a. Irving Greenberg

Orthodox rabbi, Irving Greenberg, a prominent advocate of Jewish pluralism is a major voice in contemporary Jewish thought on religious pluralism. The focal point of his intellectual reflection including his approach to religious pluralism is the Holocaust.³⁴ Greenberg's "post-Holocaust covenantal theology"³⁵ is very much grounded on the biblical concepts which I have highlighted earlier in this paper. For Greenberg, pluralism is the "outgrowth of the recognition that the human being as an image of God is of infinite value and equal."³⁶ He believes that religious pluralism as a tool for *tikkun olam* in helping to eliminate religious absolutism or totalizing tendencies of religion which has caused so much destruction. In this regard, the Holocaust becomes Greenberg's reference point where he argues that it is the "primary responsibility of all people is to honor and promote the value of every human life."³⁷ In Greenberg's eyes, the *Sboah* (Holocaust) is testimony to how the image of God has been devalued and trampled upon.

Greenberg also utilizes the concept of God's covenantal relationship to humankind as a symbol of God's love for humankind. Through the covenant, humans become cocreators with God in perfecting the world. However, Greenberg views that God's commitment to the covenant is evidenced by God's self-restraint in the use of power apart from human agency. He believes that in our era, God acts in history through the deeds of human beings. The covenantal claim on human beings is for responsible use of power applied to the perfecting of the world. This means that humans need to practice self-restraint and self-criticism in its use of power and in its claims about truth. Greenberg believes that religious pluralism is very critical in balancing and dividing power as a means to guard against excesses.

Greenberg's view of other religious traditions is a great shift from other Jewish thinkers in the past. He views Christianity as "an organic outgrowth of Judaism"³⁸ which has become a "counterpart religion"³⁹ to Judaism. Like Judaism, Christianity has established its own standing and provides real meaning for those who embrace the faith around the world. Greenberg's inclusivist view is not only limited to Christianity but also all religious traditions

³⁴ Sandra B. Lubarsky, "Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 113.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Greenberg, 108.

³⁷ Lubarsky, "Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought", 113.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

including those that do not fit the covenantal model, which he feels have “their own salvific power and legitimacy as well as their own spiritual dignity.”⁴⁰ This leads to his affirmation that traditions can guide and inspire one another.

Greenberg recognizes the risk that this inclusivistic worldview may lead to a condition of cultural relativism. However, it is more important for him that “faiths learn to witness effectively in the presence of the full dignity of the other. This would pave the way for a plurality of positive, credible models of faith enriching and correcting each other – and preventing abuse and violence on the part of any one privileged faith.”⁴¹

b. David Hartman

Another major contemporary thinker from the Orthodox Jewish tradition is Rabbi David Hartman, the founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, which is dedicated to addressing religious, political and ethical issues facing Israeli society. His main focus is the integration of Jewish tradition with modern Israeli society with the aim of instilling what he calls “covenantal consciousness”⁴² in order to shape the identity of Israeli society in response to political self-determination. Religious pluralism is central to Hartman’s theological project in his reflection on issues on intrareligious and interreligious relations.

Unlike Greenberg, Hartman does not view the “Holocaust as revelatory.”⁴³ He views that “it is, rather, in memory of Sinai, not Auschwitz, that Jews must build a just and moral society that includes efforts to create a shared moral language with the nations of the world.”⁴⁴ He believes that religious pluralism can lead to “a new level of spiritual dignity”⁴⁵ based on the Sinai event, which Hartman believes is the normative frame of Jewish life.

Hartman views that “cultural monism is no longer a psychological option”⁴⁶ in Israel and that there is a need to rethink messianic triumphalism and discover a new paradigm which allows the religious Other to “enter into the Jewish consciousness with love rather than suspicion.”⁴⁷

Hartman’s assertion is that “belief in radical freedom, in an open future, in surprise and novelty are crucial elements of normative Judaism.”⁴⁸ In this regard, he argues that the purpose of revelation is to bring humanity back into relationship with God and to counter individual freedom with community stability and “not meant to be a source of absolute, eternal and transcendent truth”⁴⁹ but it is rather “an expression of God’s love and God’s ability to love us in our imperfection.”⁵⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Greenberg, 106.

⁴² Lubarsky, “Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought”, 119.

⁴³ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hartman, 76.

⁴⁸ Lubarsky, “Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought”, 120.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁰ Hartman, 79.

Hartman is against any claims of universality for either revelation or redemption. Revelation is about establishing community and continuity of structure within history; it is always particular and limited to a specific community. Revelation is the confirmation God chooses to enter human history and establishes particular relationships with human communities. This is manifested in the development of multiples communities that have legitimate responsive relationships to God.

Thus, Hartman argues that faith communities need not be rivals. Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are distinct spiritual paths which bear witness to the complexity and fullness of the infinite. Hartman feels that this “preserves the understanding that God is greater than any single faith community; it frees humans from the mistaken belief that any revelation is universal; and it reasserts the sacredness of all human life, regardless of different truth claims.”⁵¹

c. Jewish Renewal Movement

Lastly, we have the Jewish Renewal Movement, a uniquely American movement that developed in response to various cultural shifts from the 60s to the early 80s. Its leading voices are Rabbis Arthur Waskow, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Arthur Green, and Michael Lerner.

The movement draws on Hasidism for its spiritual vitality as well as adopting the Reconstructionist idea that Judaism is an evolving civilization in which the past has a “vote but not a veto.”⁵² Religious pluralism is among its key concerns besides other modern concerns like feminism, egalitarianism and environmentalism. The Renewalists’ notion of “paradigm shift”⁵³ involves a reconstruction of Judaism similar to the major reconstructions in the past when Judaism had to adapt to societal transformations resulting from Hellenism, Spanish Inquisition and the European emancipation.

A key feature in Renewalist discourse is the idea of “Godwrestling”⁵⁴ which requires people to emphasize the importance of personal experience with God by connecting to traditional sources “without getting stuck”⁵⁵ in them. Renewalists provide reasonable flexibility in its interpretation and expansion of biblical and traditional texts in view of the “new religious experience and new cultural insights and sensibilities.”⁵⁶

Like earlier Jewish thinkers, Renewalists also base their starting point from the teaching that humankind is created in the image of God and that God’s presence is throughout the world. This inclusiveness has allowed ideas like “God didn’t speak at just one Sinai”⁵⁷ and “respect for and often learning from other spiritual paths”⁵⁸ to emerge within

⁵¹ Lubarsky, “Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought”, 122.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the Renewalist discourse. In fact, their embrace of Buddhism reflects a major shift in Jewish thought. This would have been something unthinkable in the past especially that the idea of a transcendent God does not exist in Buddhist doctrine.

Renewalists are committed to the belief in God's presence in the world and thus begin with respect for the religious experience of others. This is translated in their "respect for the right of individuals to explore other traditions, given both the intensely personal nature of spirituality and the belief that God's continuing creative energy is at work throughout the world."⁵⁹

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have seen a brief overview of the transformative process in Jewish thought in the course of its long history. Jewish thinkers have continuously reflected and adapted their understanding of biblical scriptures and traditional texts in the light of new realities and experiences.

Certain core ideas like humankind being created in the image of God and God's covenantal relationship with humankind remain consistent in Jewish consciousness while meanings of ideas like the Noachide covenant have changed significantly according to different Jewish socio-historical contexts.

However, most importantly for me, from this limited study of the evolving Jewish tradition, I have come to believe that the notion of "inclusive faith" is very much the foundation in all religious traditions. Exclusivistic interpretations were later innovations, which were necessary for the purpose of safeguarding the integrity and survival of the tradition. From the Jewish case, we have observed how the Jewish attitude toward other religions was rooted not in exclusivism but rather in the fear of idolatry. Without this fear of idolatry in modern Jewish consciousness, the basis of rejection of other religions also has been removed. This can be affirmed from the growing emergence of inclusivistic ideas in Jewish thought in the contemporary period. Additionally, Jewish thinkers have progressed to not only embrace Christianity and Islam but also other non-Abrahamic faiths like Hinduism and Buddhism.

On a closing note, I would like to echo Hartman's call to build "religious communities where acceptance of 'the other' and celebration of religious diversity go hand in hand with intense piety and religious devotion"⁶⁰ This would be the next step in my future personal endeavor as I reflect and engage my own tradition.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 122.

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