Covenant Implications for Ministry: A Jewish Perspective

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Background. Any examination of the question of religious pluralism within the naval service must be rooted in the context of the American society as a whole. America, unlike most other societies, is a pluralistic society in a number of ways, i.e. ethnically, racially, linguistically, and religiously. This is of particular significance for chaplains in their ministry within the sea services, where they touch the lives of such a diverse cross-section of America.

The developers of the Constitution saw the vital need for separation of powers, ensuring that no one group or individual would have complete sway over another. Coming out of a European background, the doctrine of separation between church and state was deemed necessary. The Bill of Rights guarantees in its First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishing of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The chaplaincy was established to ensure freedom of religion for members of the Armed Forces, while complying with the non-establishment clause. This is a very difficult balance to maintain. Chaplains are required to facilitate free exercise of religions, often differing vastly from his or her own.

With regard to the Navy, SECNAVINST 1730.7 "Religious Ministries within the Department of the Navy," states in part, "Its purpose is to provide for the free exercise of religion for all members of the naval service, their dependents, and other authorized persons appropriate to their rights and needs and providing staff

support to this end throughout the Department of the Navy."

Navy Regulations, 1973, article 0722, paragraph 2, provides that "The religious preferences and varying religious needs of individuals shall be recognized, respected, encouraged, and ministered to as practicable."

SECNAVINST 1730.7 deals with the question of providing and facilitating: "Administering the Command Religious Program by conducting divine services, administering sacraments and ordinances, performing rites and ceremonies of the chaplain's particular faith group and facilitating the provisions of religious ministries for personnel of other faith groups."

DOD Directive 1304.19 echoes the need to provide and facilitate in the "Nomination of Chaplains for the Armed Forces." It states in part, "... facilitate ministries appropriate to the rights and needs of persons of other faith groups."

It is clear at the outset, that a great deal of providing and facilitating is required of a chaplain in the naval service, in terms of religious pluralism. The expectations of a chaplain as a minister of religion is not duplicated in the civilian sector of our society. The goal is to find approaches to effective ministry in a pluralistic setting, even though we may come from an exclusivistic, conventional, theological perspective. It is with this in mind that this paper is written to offer some guidance to chaplains.

Biblical Concepts of Covenant

The concept of covenant, especially as applied to the relationship between humanity and God, is generally understood as a special relationship of exclusivity. Often, it is only open to members of one's own group or religious brotherhood. It therefore creates, tacitly, an "insider and outsider" outlook and approach. Is it possible to avoid this pitfall, while still affirming the concept of a conventional relationship with God, a relationship so fundamental to the conception of modern religion? Is it possible to remain committed to covenant theology and to serve all people, regardless of faith, in a pluralistic setting? The teachings of Judaism bear out an affirmative answer to these questions.

Jacob B. Agus, presents clearly in his article "The Covenant Concept—Particularistic, Pluralistic, or Futuristic?" that there are both particularistic elements and pluralistic elements in Judaism. It is a matter of emphasis and need, as to how these elements and trends are applied. Agus quotes the Bible scholar Harry Orlinsky as emphasizing an exclusivistic attitude.

> In the view of the biblical writers, God and Israel had entered voluntarily into a contract as equal partners to serve and further the interests of one another exclusively. (Harry Orlinsky, *Violence and Defense in Jewish Experience.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977, p. 58)

Agus asserts that this tendency for an exclusivism was to be found both in Judaism and in Christianity. He writes, "Both religions were frequently dominated by the champions of an exclusionist theology."[1]

The exclusionist theology was, however, counterbalanced by other more encompassing understandings. Agus shows that, "Nehemiah's only reference to a covenant (Nehemiah 9:8) is to the one concluded with Abraham, 'the father of a multitude of nations.'"[2] There are several other covenants, "... The covenant with humankind, represented by Adam and Eve, as well as Noah and his descendants, and the covenant with Abraham as the father of all who convert."[3]

To Agus, Abraham becomes a symbol of universality.

> Abraham's call is described as a kind of exodus, the beginning of the destiny of Israel, and it is stated in terms of universality, 'and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you.'4

God's relationship with Israel, "... was due to God's goodness, love, and compassion."[5] Some authors of biblical writings in• Agus's words were guilty of, "... the narcissistic feeling of superiority.... (Isaiah 28:10, 13) The covenant concept may easily be corrupted to the point of shutting out the openness of the faith-event, its dynamism, its infinite outreach."[6]

Harold Coward, writing his *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* takes note of the possible historical reasons for Jewish acceptance of tolerance in its covenantal outlook.

The experience of being a minority group in other cultures ... has been the norm for Judaism for countless generations. From the biblical period to the present, Judaism has had to formulate beliefs and practices in the face of challenges from other cultures and religions.[7]

One might think that this would create, an attitude of intolerance, but it did not. Perhaps the opposite is the case. According to Coward,

It is this notion of being committed to God that is fundamental to Jewish theology and to Jewish understanding of the relationship of other peoples to God. Just as God has entered into a special covenant relationship with the Jews, there is no reason why God could not enter into other relationships with other peoples.

While for the Jews it is the Mosaic—and later the Davidic covenant—that is true and authoritative, for other peoples (e.g. the Christians or Muslims) it will be their particular relationships with God that will be true and authoritative (for them).[8]

The covenantal idea of Israel seems in some ways paradoxical. At once it is particularistic and universalistic.

In virtue of the covenant, Israel then fulfills a paradox at the heart of human history, a specifically religious community... the people of God is at the same time a reality belonging to this world.... As a consequence, its national experience, in which all others can recognize themselves, is going to take on a religious meaning which will shed light on faith.[9]

Perhaps nothing serves as well the interests of universalism in biblical literature than the motif of man created in the image of God. The creation by God of a single person unifies mankind at the outset within the first few chapters of Scripture.

The second chapter of Genesis is concerned not only with the history of a single man, but with the history of all humanity, as is clear from the meaning of the word *Adam.* which means 'man.' For the Semitic mind, the ancestor of a race carries in himself the collectivity 'which has come from him.' ...This is what has been called 'the corporate personality,'[10]

Although Adam would appear to be the perfect choice for use as a basis for Rabbinic theology as Judaism relates to the external world, it is really the person of Noah and his descendants who deserve this honored place in rabbinic literature. Noah acquires for himself and his sons the title of the progenitor of all of mankind, following the disastrous flood. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* article on covenant states, "But it is especially the covenant of Noah which was interpreted by the Rabbis to include all the laws of humanity." [11]

When God promised Noah to send no deluge, he also made a covenant with the earth that men should be filled with love for their homes so that all parts of the earth might be inhabited.[12]

Rabbinic Concept of Noahism and Noahide Commandments

The entire human race was seen as descending from the three sons of Noah following the flood.[13] After the flood an additional commandment was added to the Noahide ordinances, "the limb of a living animal." This was an interpretation, based on the verse, "You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it." (Genesis 9:4). *Exodus Rabbah,* Mishpatim Ch. 30:9 states this explicitly, "He gave to Adam six commandments and added one to Noah." Since Adam and mankind were originally to have been vegetarian, the commandment was added to Noah and his generations concerning the life-blood of animals.

It would be incorrect to believe that these seven Noahide commandments were limited in their scope. The Talmud demonstrates that it is not necessarily 'seven,' although conceptually it appears that way. These seven commandments are only 'commandment principles'—general commandments, each one involving numerous details. These details can be found in the Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 56b, 59a, and 60a. In his biblical commentary, Nahmanides (d. 1270) on the verse in Genesis 34:13 writes,

The sons of Noah were commanded the laws of stolen property, fraud, extortion, wages of hired workers, laws of the guardian, rapist, seducer, principles of damages, personal injury, laws of loans and borrowing, laws of commerce, etc, similar to the laws commanded to the Israelites.[14]

According to Eliezer Levy. "The sons of Noah have in their possession a complete torah with manifold precepts."[15]

Aaron Lichtenstein lists the Seven Noahide Commandments as:

I. Justice. (An imperative to pursue social justice, and a prohibition of any miscarriage of justice)

2. Blasphemy. (Prohibits a curse directed at the Supreme Being).

3. Idolatry. (Prohibits the worship of idols and planets).

4. Illicit Intercourse. (Prohibits adultery, incest, sodomy, and bestiality).

5. Homicide. (Prohibits murder and suicide).

6. Theft. (Prohibits the wrongful taking of another's goods).

7. Limb of a Living Creature. (Prohibits the eating of animal parts which were severed from a living animal).[16]

Rabbinic Judaism teaches that the Jew, based on the Sinaitic covenant, is enjoined to observe the applicable six hundred and thirteen positive and negative commandments. It would appear to be very imbalanced if the non-Jew would be obligated by only seven and, yet, receive the same reward in the Future World. Aaron HaLevi of Barcelona takes note of this,

Make no mistake about the enumeration of the Seven Laws of the Sons of Noah—these being well known and recorded in the Talmud—for they are but categories and they contain many particulars.[17]

Aaron Lichtenstein goes into a detailed analysis of the specifics of Noahide particulars, comparing the ratio between Israelite and Noahide. Ultimately, he concludes that the practical observable Israelite commandments are significantly reduced, bringing the ratio of Israelite versus Noahide to approximately four to one. **18**

The Noahide covenant with *all* mankind continued uninterrupted until the giving of the Torah at Sinai. "All nations were considered as Sons of Noah until giving of the Torah. From the giving of the Torah forward, only the nations of the world are called Sons of Noah, and not the Israelites." *(Mishnah Nedarim* 3:11) The distinction between Sons of Noah (Gentiles) and Israelites (Jews) was only in regard to convenantal responsibilities, but not in regard to rewards. "He who observed the seven Noachian laws was regarded as a domiciled alien, as one of the pious of the Gentiles." **19** This meant that all righteous persons, regardless of origin and specific covenant would receive their portion in the World to Come. No distinction was made between Gentile and Jew.

Moses Maimonides demonstrates that the Sons of Noah are by no means restricted in their covenant, but could opt to go beyond its scope.

Sons of Noah desiring to perform any commandments of the Torah, in order to receive (additional) reward—he is not to be prevented from doing it properly.[20]

The Noachian precepts represent a theory of universal religion, emphasizing good actions rather than right belief, ethical living rather than credal adherence, they require only loyalty to a basic code of ethical conduct, and rest upon the recognition of a divine Creator.[21]

Maimonides reaffirms, "A heathen who accepts the seven commandments and observes them scrupulously is a 'righteous alien' and will have a portion in the world to come ..."[22]

The concept of a universal nationalism, transcending the particular covenant of the Israelites is expressed by the Prophet Zechariah, "In that day many nations will attach themselves to the Lord and become His people . . ." (Zechariah 2:15) This does not refer to any transformation officially, or adherence to the Israelite covenant, but to a universal acceptance and recognition of God.

Rabbinic Concept of "In Pursuit of Paths of Peace"

Besides the Rabbinic concept of the Noahide commandments and covenant symbolized by the rainbow, is an additional concept—"in pursuit of paths of peace." Generally, the Torah and rabbinic legislation deal with the Israelite sovereign nation. As was quite normal in the ancient Near-East, legislation dealt with the indigenous population and rarely with the foreign element living in its midst.

In modem times, especially in America, we speak in far broader terms than elsewhere in the past. Today, the concept of citizenship is widely applied to most people living within a country's borders. In ancient Israel, at least theoretically according to the Rabbis, there was a sovereign nation composed of Israelites, members of a particular covenant. Additionally, there were others, i.e. non-Jews, a minority in their midst. The question was how to deal with this minority? Since this was not dealt with in the original sources, it required additional rabbinic legislation.

Our major source is Maimonides' Code, the *Mishneh Torah,* which brings down laws applicable: past, present, and future. Maimonides establishes that the Israelite courts are to judge cases involving non-Jews in accordance with the non-Jews' own seven commandment principles. It is expected that these principles of moral living are to be known and practiced.

It is one thing to judge cases affecting non-Jews with the Noahide principles, but what about the other areas of day to day human contact? It is at this point that the concept of "in pursuit of paths of peace" comes into play. The alien is to be loved and cared for without distinction made between Jew and Gentile. Maimonides writes,

... and so it seems to me: we deal with the resident-alien with courtesy and loving-kindnesses as with an Israelite, for we are commanded to sustain them as it is said, '... give it to the stranger in your community to eat ...' (Deuteronomy **14:21).** This is what the Sages said: We do not withhold from them our blessing of 'shalom.'[23]

It is not only to engender courteous relationships with non-Jews, but also to demonstrate goodwill in practical matters where help and assistance is necessary and vital. Maimonides continues,

... Even Gentiles—the Sages required to visit their sick, to bury their dead along with the dead of the Israelites and to provide for their impoverished together with the poor Israelites in pursuit of peace. (Book of Judges. Ch. 10:12)[24]

Maimonides bases these practical considerations of the needs of Gentiles, on God's own compassion over all His creation. "The Lord is good to all and His mercies are over all His works." (Psalms 145:9) and it is said, "Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths, peaceful." (Proverbs 3:17)

Implications for Ministry in a Pluralistic Setting

Chaplains serving in the United States Armed Forces are required by regulation to serve all, regardless of religious faith or affiliation. This is an expectation unprecedented in history and in human religious experience. Since a chaplain is also expected to faithfully represent his or her own religious faith group, conflicts may arise, at times.

Samuel Sandmel in his book *We Jews and Jesus,* sets forth what he perceives as a primary conflict:

A first item involves an inescapable necessity Christians and Jews need to recognize that Christianity and Judaism until the modem age . . have felt about each other that they were mutually exclusive, reciprocally contradictory of each other, and that the one was true and the other false.[25]

The chaplaincy requires a more comprehensive attitude towards others; not "mutual exclusivity." In examining Judaism, it is possible to demonstrate two possible attitudes within its covenantal theology; the particularistic side or the universalistic side. At times, one aspect was emphasized over the other. There was a constantly shifting emphasis based on needs of contemporary society.

Living in pluralistic America, it is necessary to delve deep into the vast repositories of collective wisdom in religious tradition. Somewhere inside, it is possible to find what we as humans have in common. Since much of Western religion is rooted in a common tradition in Judaism, much of the research in this paper is applicable, in some measure. We see a common God for all of humankind. We find a common ancestry in Adam and later in Noah.

The Noahide covenant is composed of seven commandment principles that are applicable in all of civilized society. The question asked in this universal covenant is not what is your religion or theology, but rather do you behave in accordance with universal principles of acceptable behavior? The universal covenant accords all respect. regardless of religion. All righteous are deemed worthy of salvation granted by the Almighty.

Some may have difficulty, in principle, with some of the contents of this paper. Perhaps this is because of the strong emphasis on particularism in their own faith group. This is understandable, but it should be pointed out that many theologians of various backgrounds are working on this same question from their own traditions. My studies brought me to the writings of Krister Stendahl, specifically, the book *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles.* Stendahl calls for a rereading of Christian literature which could shed light on a universalistic approach.

People turn to chaplains in times of need. In practical terms, we cannot have a chaplain of every faith available everywhere, at all times. Therefore, every chaplain, no matter what our faith, must be available to serve all when needed. From my perspective, the concept of all humanity as part of a universal covenant offers the most workable solution. For those experiencing difficulty with this solution, Jewish tradition offers the additional practical solution of "in pursuit of paths of peace." In Judaism, there were times when the Torah provided no specific direction on how to deal with foreign persons living in the Israelites' midst. The practical

solution of the Rabbis was to invoke a principle of "in pursuit of paths of peace." That is, it was to treat the alien exactly as one treats a member of one's own covenant. In all cases of human need, there can be no distinction made between the homeborn and the alien. Ultimately, the "paths of peace" were codified in Jewish books of jurisprudence.

Our ministry as chaplains is, more often than not, in the realm of healing. We work with human beings. created in the image of God. The realities of life are often overwhelming, requiring one human being to come to the aid of another. Because it is thus, the application of the concept of universal covenant, and the principle of "in pusuit of paths of peace," provide a safe path upon which to walk in faithfulness to one's own tradition, while facilitating the spiritual healing of all the sons and daughters of Noah.

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Appendix I

Rabbinic Sources

"For God offered the Law to all the nations in turn.... So Israel received the whole Law, with all its details and developments, including the seven commands which the Noahides took upon themselves." *(Sifre Deuteronomy,* Berakh, §343.142b)

"The sons of Noah were given seven commands in respect of: 1. idolatry, 2. incest (unchastity), 3. shedding of blood, 4. profanation of the Name of God, 5. justice, 6. robbery, 7. cutting off flesh or limb from a living animal." *(Genesis Rabbah,* Noah XXXIV, 8)

"What was Deborah's character that she should have judged Israel ... ? I call heaven and earth to witness that whether it be Gentile or Israelite, man or woman, slave or handmaid, according to the deed which he does, so will the Holy Spirit rest on him." *(Tana debei Elijah,* p. 48)

"God said to Moses; 'Is there respect of persons with Me? Whether it be Israelite or Gentile ... whosoever doeth a good deed (mitzvah), shall find the reward at its side, as it says, 'Thy righteousness is like the everlasting hills; man and beast alike Thou savest, 0 Lord,' " (Psalms 36:6) *(Yalkut,* Lekh Lekha §76)

"And these are the things they prescribe in the interests of peace; . . . They must not prevent the poor among the non-Jews from gathering gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, and the field-corner--for the sake of peace. *(Mishnah Gittin* 5:8)

"Poor Gentiles may glean and participate in the 'corner of the field' and the 'forgotten sheaf' charities. *(Mishnah Gittin* 5:8)

"Our Rabbis taught: It is proper to support Gentile poor together with the poor of Israel. It is proper to visit their sick together with the sick of Israel. It is proper to bury the dead bodies of Gentiles together with the dead bodies of Israel, because it will foster peace." *(Talmud Gittin* 61a)

"In a city where there are both Jews and Gentiles, the collectors of alms collect both from Jews and from Gentiles; they feed the poor of both, visit the sick of both, bury both, comfort the mourners whether Jews or Gentiles, and they restore the lost goods of both—for the sake of peace." *(Jerusalem Talmud Dem.* IV §6)

"Saving of life takes precedence of the Sabbath, in case of Jew and Gentile alike." *(Talmud Yoma* 85a)

"Rabbi Simeon ben Halafta said: There is no way to bless except through peace, as it is said, 'The Lord blesses His people with peace.'(Psalms 29:11)**"** *(Numbers Rabbah,* Pinehas XXI,i).

Endnotes

1Jacob B. Agus, "The Covenant Concept—Particularistic, Pluralistic, or Futuristic?", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies,* (Philadelphia: Temple University, Spring 1981), Vol. XVIII, pp. 222-3.

2*Ibid*. p. 220.

3*Ibid*. p. 220.

4 *Ibid.* p. 220.

5 *Ibid*. p. 221.

6 *Ibid.* p. 222.

7Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books,

1985). p. I.

8Ibid. p. 2

9Xavier Leon-Dufour, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology,* Second Edition (New York:The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 417.

10Ibid. p. p. 328.

11Isadore singer, ed., *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1912),Vol. IV, p. 320.

12Ibid. p. 320.

13Isadore Singer, Vol. VII. p. 648.

14My own translation of Nahmanides from traditional Hebrew text.

15Eliezer Levy, *Foundations of Jewish Law* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing Co., 1967), p. 13. Translation my own.

16Aaron Lichtenstein, *The Seven Laws of Noah* (New York: The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press, 1981), p. 12.

17Ibid. p. 92.

18Ibid. pp. 90-1.

I9Isadore Singer, Vol. VII, p. 649.

20Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Book of Judges* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook. 1966).

21Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1964), p. 93.

221sadore Twersky. p. 221.

23Moses Maimonides**,** *Book of Judges,* chap. 10:12.

24Ibid., ch. 10:12.

25Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), **p. 6.**

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