

Many Nations Under God: Judaism and Other Religions

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Alan Brill is Cooperman/Ross Professor, in honor of Sister Rose Thering, in the Graduate Department of Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall. He is completing a book on Judaism and Other Religions. This article appears in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Does Judaism have a theology of other religions? Emphatically, yes. Judaism has a wide range of texts that offer thoughts on other religions. In my book, *Many Nations under God: Judaism and other Religions*, I present the broad range of traditional sources bearing on this question of the theological relationship between Judaism and other religions. How does one theologically account for the differences between religions? How do we balance our multifaith world with the Jewish texts? These questions are important for both self-definition and social action.

Globalization

As a prelude to encountering other religions, Orthodox Jews need to learn to kick the secularization habit, viewing the outside world as secular. The same forces that allowed the upswing of Orthodox Judaism during the last decades also led to the rise of Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditionalism. In the 1990's people still thought that traditional religion and religious conflicts were simply a throwback to a pre-modern era. Religion now plays a major role in the entire public sphere of politics, media, and culture.

Currently, as mentioned in a recent issue of the Economist, "everywhere we look, we have religious problems. Globalization has propelled traditionalism as a barrier against change, and for the prosperous suburbanite traditional religion has become a lifestyle coach. In a post 9/11 world, religion in its traditional forms has

returned as a force in politics and civil society. Religion is a major role in world conflicts and resolutions, a world where people can compromise on territory but not on messianic visions.”

The debates between proponents of Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations and those of Thomas Friedman’s Lexus and the Olive Tree have replaced the local concerns of the nineteen-fifties. Like modernity and nationalism, globalization has potential for both good and bad, creating a new reality, which demands confrontation and response. Globalization offers very real and very immediate threats. Globalization creates a need to choose greater openness in place of fear and closure, and to choose real politics over academics.

To respond to the current decade, rehearsing old parameters is academic. To rehearse the statements of the tolerance of 1780 or even 1960 is not engagement.

We should be seeking guidance for the contemporary issues. We need to provide sanctity to the world. Social issues need a religious perspective. Not entering the modern world of globalization and dwelling alone is a form of “triumph without battle”. Creating closed ethnic enclaves does not address global issue or make the world a better place.

In order to learn about other religions and to see ourselves through the eyes of the other, we have to acknowledge that when we encounter religious people outside of Judaism we are addressing another religious community.

These encounters occur not just nationally and globally but even locally. Every Sunday my local community center in my predominately Jewish suburb, also containing a strong Christian and Muslim presence, has a continuous stream of Hindu, Buddhist, Sikhs, and Zoroastrian services using the classrooms. Diana Eck, a professor at Harvard University, points out that it is a new religious America. “We the people of the United States of America are now religiously diverse as never before and some Americans do not like it.” She advocates active engagement, real constructive understanding of others, without relativism or abdication of differences.

Whereas in the 1950’s people saw America as Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, now every county has Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and others. Mosques, halal shops, Bahai Temples, are in my seemingly Jewish neighborhood, and Hindu and Buddhist altars with food offerings are ever present in my local shopping area. Numerically many of these groups are quite small and America remains predominantly Protestant. Similar to the acceptance of Jews in the 1950’s as one

of the 3 faiths of America, despite their small numbers, there is new atmosphere of religious pluralism. There was a time when we met others only as foreigners – as travelers in strange locations. In America they are now our co-workers, schoolmates and neighbors.

My starting point is, therefore, not tolerance based on eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideas that would discuss religious encounter in secular terms. Nor is my goal to simply – for pragmatic reasons- to hammer tolerance into the tradition. Presupposing a tolerance outside of religion does not respect religious positions because it claims that all that counts is the secular and it avoids the public dimensions of religion. Using Meiri to construct a liberal vision misreads the Meiri as if he was a Mill or Locke on secular tolerance, and, more importantly, it misreads the other whom we encounter as if they are secular. Others create tolerance by seeking a universal “image of God” (tselem elokim) to respect all humanity. But such universalism remains a universal tolerance of the enlightenment, that is, outside of the specifics of religion.

Current Trends

In order to come to terms with the increasing tensions between forces of globalization and those of tradition, we need to rise to the moral challenge. Religion offers an essential means of providing dignity, sanctity, and spirituality to meet these new challenges.

Rabbi Shaar Yashuv Cohen, the current chief rabbi of Haifa offers a Rav Kook inspired vision. “We need to find the best in each nation....and they need to be able to respect us. A nice garden is not just one flower but a variety ...The world is God’s garden- it needs many flowers and we are God’s gardeners.”

Evangelicals have been the biggest supporters of Christian Zionism and have funded mainly Orthodox Jews to move to Israel as part of nefesh benefesh. This rapprochement with Evangelicals has led Rabbi Shlomo Riskin to speak of a double covenant theory with Christianity.

Recently, the chief rabbis of Israel have met with Hindu religious leaders in India and issued a joint statement that “their respective traditions teach that there is One supreme Being who is the Ultimate reality, who has created this world.”

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks offers a universalism of one God beyond a particular religion based on Jewish texts.

Judaism is a particularist monotheism. It believes in one God but not in one religion, one culture, one truth. The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all mankind... There is a difference between God and religion. God is universal, religions are particular.

For Rabbi Sacks, we can witness the piety, ethics, or even God of other religions as a manifestation of the God of Abraham, even while acknowledging that their religion is different from Judaism.

Religion can, and does, serve as meeting place of encounter within our globalized world. Facing others in a post-secular age, therefore, means that we must choose the moderate positions from within our own tradition as a basis for discussion. Traditional Jewish texts offer ample resources to make this possible. At this point the urgent agenda is to construct usable moderate theologies from the traditional religious positions.

Judaism and Other Religions

I have recently completed a work on Judaism and other religions where I set out the classical texts that can be used to address other religions.

Let me make clear that what I am presenting is not dialogue, but rather a precursor to any encounter that I envision between Judaism and other religions. I am laying out the possibilities with which Jewish theology can understand other religions and construct a theology of other religions based on traditional sources.

The first step is to understand some of the basic terms used for categorizing these texts: exclusivist, pluralist, inclusivist, and universalist.

Exclusivism, states that one's own community, tradition, and encounter with God comprise the one and only exclusive truth; all other claims on encountering God are, a priori, false.

Pluralism takes the opposite position, accepting that no one tradition can claim to possess the singular truth. All group's beliefs and practices are equally valid.

Inclusivism situates itself between these two extremes, where one acknowledges that many communities possess their own traditions and truths, but maintains the importance of one's comprehension as culminating, or subsuming other truths. One's own group possesses the truth; other religious groups contain parts of the truth.

Universalism postulates a universal monotheism; it was widely taught by medieval Jewish philosophers who postulated a common Neo-platonic or Aristotelian truth to all religions.

My book presents the many Jewish texts that take these approaches. Inclusivist texts include: Halevi, Maimonides, Abarbanel, Emden, Hirsch, Kook, Philo, Kimhi, Gikkitilla, Adret, Arama, and Seforno.

The exclusivist texts include Toledot Yeshu, Kalir, Rashi, Abraham bar Hiyya, Naftali Zevi Berlin, Zvi Yehudah Kook, Luria, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, and Tanya.

Universalist texts include: Saadyah, Ibn Garibol, Ibn Ezra, Maimonidian commentators, Immanuel of Rome, Nathanel ibn Fayumi, Mendelssohn, Israel Lipschutz, Luzzatto, Mendel Hirsch, Menashe ben Israel, Elijah Benamozegh, Henry Pereira Mendes, Joseph Hertz.

Can we compare other religions to Judaism? Both medieval texts and modern scholars have offered insight into whether we share monotheism, Biblical narrative, or human religious expressions. In addition, many are unaware that there are numerous references in Jewish texts to Eastern religions, especially Brahmins, and Indian religions.

Besides the classical texts, the civil religion of America challenges us to consider that we have a common covenant under one God. Does that work theologically? The book evaluates the clash between the positions of those in favor and those against. It is important to note how the confusion created in recent decades when the word covenant is used for a person's individual religious commitments rather than a universalism.

The important point of all these texts and discussions is to avoid the false dichotomy between a medieval exclusivism or a modern pluralist individualism. One should learn not to seek a position where everything is equal or a common ground syncretism. Equal legitimacy of everything practiced in another faith is not a pre-requisite for an encounter. Encountering others is not a zero-sum- game of exclusivism or relativism.

I met a young rabbi who in his false humility and modern emphasis of the self, told a group of Imams that he cannot speak about God in Judaism since one can never be certain about God. He emphasized that since he cannot speak about his own tradition then he certainly could not affirm any commonality. For him, all commonality would be existentially false. Rather, for him, we can only speak as humans; God is not part of reality. Each community just lives as its ethnic

community. This is not a useful approach for a theology of other religions. Many of those who say that a person cannot know anything certain about his or her own religion, thinking they are thereby creating pluralism, are in effect creating an exclusivism. If all we each have is our own subjective practices without any grounding, then it is a pluralism of human stories, not religion.

Knowing the Jewish texts about other religions means that Judaism does indeed have different rules than other religions. We need to come to the table with the breath and depth of our conviction. There are many positions and many sources. Different situations require different texts. All of them do play a role and all of them continue to be used in the community. We need to appreciate what the wide palette of traditional texts says about other religions and stop thinking that we already know the range of opinions. Our religious community has a robust tradition of varying interpretations of the texts, often yielding competing understandings. We have to be open to the multiple voices that can speak to the various sides of this discussion

We must be humble and honest in the acceptance of who others are and who we are. I reject a simplistic view of all religions in some collective approach where differences are minimized. Rationality and theology are important in accomplishing anything we can transmit and make use of for self-understanding. Theology of the other is not dialogue. To realize that we should not confuse the public policy decision of whether to engage in actual theological dialogue in a given situation, with the theoretical question of whether Judaism actually has a theology of other religions.

Challenge

One of the bigger challenges for a theological position today is to stop apologetics and acknowledge the demonizing exclusivism of many Jewish texts.

For the Jewish exclusivist, the universe is Judeo-centric and the other religions are not relevant; at best we can speak of individual gentiles as righteous and that there is knowledge among the nations, but the overlap remains in the realm of their coincidental adaptation of Jewishly acceptable ideas. Most of the time such a viewpoint remains a form of myopia, thinking that Jews are the only protagonists in the march of history. At its most particular, Judaism has a tribal view of itself as the only possessor of morality and portrays contemporary gentiles as bereft of morals.

The major form of Jewish exclusivism intrinsic to many classic Jewish texts is not merely chosenness, but rather a dualistic sense of separatism. Chosenness and the special status of Israel itself are not the problem. Rather, it is the splitting of the world into two groups, Jews and all others. Exclusivists, tend to consider themselves tolerant when they find grounds to refrain from condemning those outside the system.

However, we also possess horrific texts of demonizing the other. They cannot simply be ignored. This horrific approach moved the exclusivity of the past to a new and potentially dangerous realm. While the influence of Lurianic cosmology has certainly waned with modernity, these texts nevertheless occasionally and surprisingly appear in the rhetoric of contemporary Jewish separatists and are cited by anti-Semites eager to prove the racism of Judaism. Rather than avoiding them, we must acknowledge their existence and then distance ourselves from them. To repudiate a racist text is not necessarily to relinquish exclusivist texts or the concept of chosen Peoplehood.

Cherry picking out the positive statement about gentiles and other religions, the predominant response, is not adequate because it does not acknowledge the problem. It does not lead to fruitful discussion that leads to responsibility. Modern Orthodox apologetics has an implicit supersessionism, thinking that it already has answers and moved beyond the other positions, which has left it unable to respond to the return of extreme exclusivist positions. The entire spectrum of positions must be represented and honestly presented.

Moving forward

Many Jews still say that Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, was responsible for horrible crimes in the past so how can we trust them? And many have similar feelings about Islam. Jewish participants need to agree to work to overcome their fear and distrust of the Church. Jews need to overcome their sense of minority status and find a new social model for their interactions. We need to move beyond bitterness, both in our relationship with the Church and in our own self-understanding of our place in the world community. And we will need to consider how we have relied on this culture of victimhood even when the other who surrounds us does not wish to destroy us. We should learn to cultivate a self-understanding appropriate for our current confrontations.

Many American Jews who fail to see an immediate purpose to any interfaith encounter with Islam must remember that it is a long-term process. They should also know that extremists on either side are not part of dialogue; rather, dialogue aims to remove the ground from beneath extremists.

Dialogue does not assume that both parties enter dialogue on equal footing with comparable goals and motives. This approach would have guaranteed that the Jewish community would not have been speaking to Catholics or Protestants in the early days of Jewish-Christian reconciliation. Requiring shared motives is unfair and unreasonable.

After the Holocaust, the Christian communities undoubtedly had more work to do in the dialogue than the Jews. Should we not have engaged in that dialogue until we were "on equal footing"? Yet look at the amazing results from that encounter. When dialogue with Catholics started in the 1950s some Christians entered with a problematic treatment of Judaism. Eventually, the Catholic Church moved from teaching contempt to recognizing Judaism as a living faith. It recognized the State of Israel, and sought to remove anything in Catholicism that can be used to teach anti-Semitism.

Yet, when Jews first engaged Catholics, the immediate narrow focus was fighting anti-Semitism. Over time, Catholics began to address the very nature of their relationship with Judaism, and the problematic elements were overcome. So, too, with Islam, we need to start with small steps. Islam should be given the same chance to show reciprocity and respect.

Many in the Jewish community resist all such endeavors, and we are similarly aware that not all Muslim leaders are themselves prepared to sit with us. The Saudis may not yet be ready for religious tolerance, but right now, Muslims from Minnesota to Malaysia are seeking dialogue as a means of overcoming Western stereotypes of their faith. We should not kiss every hand extended to us, nor expect every initiative to be successful. But we should not refuse to shake hands with those who have the ability to significantly change the face and future of Islam.

Ethics

The goal should be hospitality, not just tolerance. Hospitality is simultaneously theological and ethical; it teaches us not to make serious misrepresentations of the other and to meet others in a way that makes demands upon us for welcome. The invitation to the other and then the time spent together generates actual familiarity, and a potential for change in ourselves through the activity

In engaging in hospitality in which we receive the other as a stranger in our life (and similar to receiving a stranger in one's home), in each other's presence we learn the patterns of behavior of the other. Tolerance offers no insight or

encounter with the other. The opposite of intolerance is not necessarily tolerance, but hospitality and humanity. This is not the humanity of putting our religions away, or a subjective humanism that does not make demands on us. But, the opposite of intolerance is a humanism that demands that we cultivate an appreciation of religious difference and diversity.

We can start by thinking of the virtues of peace and reconciliation. Rabbi Moses Cordovero, the great sixteenth century Safed ethicist and Kabbalist wrote, “It is evil in the sight of the Holy One, blessed be He, if any of His creations is despised.”

How do we offer hospitality? Conversation, graciousness, and mutual respect are the keys. The art of listening, however, turns out to be a crucial factor in building healthy communities. Careful listening deepens into a discernment that goes beyond words. We come to these events truly knowing nothing about the other side and have to listen to the most basic elements. Interfaith relationships tend to be about friendship, cooperation, and collaboration around shared stories, values, and goals—not about dialogue or a lowest common religious denominator. One grows through experiences that stand out in memory as an encounter outside the normal “safety zone.” When one meets the other faith one seeks to be open to surprise or to be humbled, an experience of healing and hope. Hospitality is a commitment to a character trait and a culture of life. The goal is to learn to respect difference and diversity not just civil tolerance.

If we respect the Orthodox restrictions on dialogue and at the same time we are not seeking to find converts through theological discussion-- then what is our activity? The activity of hospitality offers a twofold answer: to expand our vision and to seek to diminish hatred and derogatory statements of others. Emmanuel Levinas mentions the ethical crime of the tyranny of the same in which I impose my categories on the other. We need to move beyond the smugness of thinking that we know everything about the other religions.

Another opposite of intolerance is to learn to engage in practical work together. Active encounter creates stories, positive stories of possibilities. Even when faiths clash in encounter or practice, we can still tell the story of where things went wrong and how we navigated the troubled times. Political states regularly engage in diplomatic relationships, cordial encounters, and practical negotiations without sharing a common political ideology.

Conclusion

Robert Wuthnow, the leading sociologist of religion, notes that Americans simultaneously give respect to all religions but at the same time harbor exclusivist views denying this very respect. The result, he says, is "a kind of tension that cannot be easily resolved . . . a tattered view of the world held together only by the loosest of logic."

Wuthnow concludes that we need to articulate middle positions between the extremes of a public pluralism and private exclusivism.

The articulation needs to be textual and theological, not just humanist. Any thoughts on these topics will have many ramifications for the Jewish self-understanding of our place in the world.

Jews need to put aside their frightened mentality and recognize the age in which we live. We have a choice of how to see the world: Is Abraham the start of monotheism, a father of many nations, blessed among people, or is he an "ivri" (literally other bank of the river) someone who dwells alone or in opposition?

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch gave a model for openness and not dwelling alone:

And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great; become a blessing (Genesis 12:2)

"The people of Abraham, in private and in public, follow one calling: to become a blessing. They dedicate themselves to the Divine purpose of bringing happiness to the world by serving as model for all nations and to restore mankind. God will grant His blessing of the renewal of life and the awakening and enlightenment of the nations, and the name of the People of Abraham shall shine forth."

This is a model of Abraham that is open to the world rather than set apart from the rest of humanity. R. Hirsch was not advocating the denial of Abraham's differences from the religiosity in Ur of the Chaldeans; rather he grasped both elements.

In our age, there are no victories from isolationism, self-absorption, and polite tolerance. If we do not engage the world, our seeming religious victories would be hollow. The diversity of religion in America in the age of globalization will likely serve as one of Orthodoxy's 21st century testing grounds.