

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM FROM A JEWISH VIEWPOINT

by DAVID HARTMAN

It is often felt — or at any rate has been felt — that scriptural revelation and divine election are incompatible with religious pluralism. Belief in the biblical Lord of History, who reveals himself to his chosen people, seems to reduce the faith commitment to one central question: what is the true faith community that mediates the one way to God? From such a viewpoint, religious tolerance and openness to other faith communities are symptoms of modernity and secularization which weaken the uncompromising spirit of true faith.¹

Persons in the revelatory tradition of the Bible, which in the broader sense includes Islam as well as Judaism and Christianity,² are often known for their zeal

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1. The work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman is important in this context. See their article, "Secularization and Pluralism" in *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Religion* (1976), 73–84. Also Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), Part 2, and *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979).

2. Islam recognizes that at least the Torah (sometimes with qualifications) is inspired, but without including it among its own scriptures in the manner of Christianity. The present article is concerned only with religious pluralism in the narrower sense as encompassing Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From a Jewish viewpoint, pluralism in the broader sense as including the other major world religions necessarily raises the question of idolatry, since those other religions do not acknowledge exclusively the God of Israel. This broader issue will therefore be dealt with in a separate article.

and passionate commitment, but not always for their liberalism and tolerance. It has been said that if one seeks the spiritual person who lives easily with his god and lets others live with theirs, one must look to Greece or Rome. Jerusalem in contrast to Athens symbolizes the religious wars of zealots claiming to have an exclusive hold on the keys to the Kingdom.

The controversies over Jerusalem today are in part related to a specific orientation to revelation and election. Can Jerusalem be recognized as the capital city of a particular community called Israel? Must the Jewish people's visible, concrete presence there be a continuous embarrassment to Christianity and Islam?

The Jewish rebuilding of Jerusalem is an embarrassment to all Christians who believed that the Jews had long ago ceased to be the people of God and would never again form an independent community in their own land. As long as the Jewish people refuses to withdraw from the stage of history and continues to keep *kashrut*, put on *tefillin* and rejoice in the observance of the commandments,³ many Christians feel uneasy or threatened. Many find it easier to sympathize with Jewish suffering at Auschwitz than with Jewish joy in the maternity wards of Jerusalem.⁴

The Locus of the Problem

Traditionally, Christian theology regarded the Jews as those who blindly persisted in living according to a superseded divine dispensation. Islam treated the Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions as willful distortions of the truth proclaimed in the eternal Koran. Responding on behalf of Judaism, Maimonides portrayed Christianity and Islam as aberrations whose adherents would repent of their folly when the Messiah came to reconstitute the Jewish polity and establish respect for the Torah among the gentiles.⁵ But are divine love and election subject to a scarcity principle that limits the authenticity of the faith experience to one and only one religious tradition? Must a believing Jew view Christian pilgrims coming to Israel as earnest devotees ultimately misguided in their spiritual quest? Need their persistent advocacy of Christianity be an embarrassment to his own faith commitment?

3. See my book *Joy and Responsibility* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi-Posner, 1978), esp. the opening essay, "The Joy of Torah," pp. 15-37.

4. Since it would be invidious (though not impossible) to illustrate this statement with quotations, it will suffice to contrast the sheer volume of Christian theological writing about the Holocaust with that about the rebirth of a Jewish independent polity.

5. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (henceforth: *MT*), Hilkhot Melakhim 11:4 (in the uncensored text). See also my discussion of his *Epistle to Yemen* in my book *Leadership in Crisis: Three Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983); also Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* IV:23.

It should be understood that the locus of the problem does not lie in the acknowledged uniqueness of God, in the commitment to monotheism, but in the claimed uniqueness of divine revelation and election. The theologies of Aristotle and Plotinus, which recognize a monotheistic principle without bringing in election and divine intervention in history, are readily compatible with tolerance for religious pluralism. An *eros*-grounded worship, in which God is the principle of perfection eliciting adoration and religious fervor, can make room for multiple faith communities.⁶ The God who is above history is also above any community. Similarly, eighteenth century deism was a philosophically attractive alternative to biblical religion because it neutralized revelation and history and therefore allowed for the inclusion of toleration and pluralism within a monotheistic framework.

Those committed to the biblical tradition, however, cannot use the deistic route to accommodate religious pluralism. They do not worship the “ground of being,” but a God who is very much involved in human history.⁷ The biblical drama is concerned essentially with history and not with nature. As Leo Strauss correctly emphasized, it is man and not nature that is fashioned in God’s image.⁸ History and revelation mediate the divine presence that seeks to become embodied in the structures of the faith community. This raises the inevitable question: to whom is the word of God expressed? Even if world history as a whole is the framework within which the divine presence operates, will not the principle of election imply an exclusive providential relationship to the history of a single community?⁹

Biblical language, too, seems to emphasize the uniqueness of the faith community. The classic formulation of God’s covenantal relationship to Israel is: “I

6. See Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* I:1–3, II:49.

7. For Aristotelian metaphysics, the heavenly bodies mirror divinity more closely than do humanity and human history. The Plotinian and Eastern mystical traditions seek a detachment from the concrete and historical in order to penetrate the sublime ahistorical divine reality, whereas the Bible depicts the relationship between God and the Jewish people as irreducibly an ongoing historical relationship. Compare the first four chapters of Maimonides’ *MT*, which concern metaphysics, with the fifth, which introduces the notions of history and the Jewish community. For a different view of the relation between biblical religion and history, see Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). Escaping from the concept of the biblical Lord of History is an aim of R.C. Zaehner in “Religious Truth,” *Truth and Dialogue*, ed. John Hick (London: Sheldon, 1974), pp. 1–19.

8. See Leo Strauss’s lecture, “Interpretation of Genesis,” published by the Center for Jewish Community Studies and originally delivered in the series “Works of the Mind” at University College, University of Chicago, on January 25, 1957. Also his “Jerusalem and Athens,” *The City College Papers*, number 6 (New York: City College, 1967), pp. 3–28.

9. Compare Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 358–359, 447–451; Nachmanides on Lev. 18:25 and Deut. 4:15, and the end of Maimonides’ *Essay on Resurrection*.

will be your God and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12). When Israel indulged in Canaanite religious practices, it was described by the prophets as a wife gone awwhoring. The God worshipped by biblical man is a consuming fire, a jealous God insisting on total, uncompromising loyalty: “Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4–5). God demands an all-consuming passion. He wants you day and night, seven days a week. Religious pluralism would seem to violate a biblical exclusivity which allows God only one jealously held marriage partner.

The notion of revelation implies that man’s way to God is confined by the revealed word of God. Were the faith experience a matter of man seeking to express his feeling of awe and love for divinity, that is, were it a one-directional outgoing of man toward God, then the criterion of legitimate expression of faith would be subjective, allowing for a variety of religious attitudes and approaches. The existentialist dictum, “Truth is subjectivity,” could be used to justify a plurality of faith postures channeling the subjective feelings of the worshiper toward God. But in a revelatory system where there is reciprocity between man and God, the will of God plays an essential role in determining the nature of religious life. It is not sufficient to express my own will and feelings. I must also ask: what does God want of me? Revelation draws man into a dialogic relationship with God; natural theology, deism and the worship involved in “ground of being” religions are ultimately monologic. Unlike the latter, revelatory systems require some source of knowing what God wants and how He responds to man’s religious life. My sincerity alone is not religiously self-validating. Man must await God’s response to determine the validity of his religious way of life.

Biblical revelation also involves the notion of divine involvement in human history. Because God as well as man has a stake in history, the God-man encounter answers both divine and human interests. However scandalous it may sound to the metaphysician, in the biblical tradition God cannot fulfil His designs for history without the cooperation of man, or at least of some part of mankind.¹⁰ Revelation to a particular person or people thus becomes an act essential to the aims of the biblical Lord of history.

Since God has such a stake in the God-man relationship, the content of revelation is a serious and vital component of biblical religion. A spouse may choose a gift for his or her beloved with infinite passion, yet the beloved may find no pleasure in the gift *per se*. Though the gesture may be noble and expressive of deep emo-

10. A.J. Heschel in *The Prophets* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962) and his other works on Jewish theology evocatively mirrors the search and need of God for man.

tion, its content may be unappealing. A wife may spend hours devotedly preparing a meal for her husband, yet what she cooked may simply not be to his taste. The intention may have been laudable, but it failed because it did not express itself in an objective form that the husband would accept. In biblical religion, likewise, the intention of the worshiper — the infinite Kirkegaardian subjective passion — will fail if it does not express itself in objective forms that find the approval of God. If knowledge of the appropriate forms has been communicated in a divine revelation, details of cultic practice necessarily acquire a vital function. Hence the connection, pointed out in particular by Judah Halevi, between revelation and concern for the objective forms of the ritual life of the community.¹¹ One must remember that the biblical perspective is one in which God accepted Abel's sacrifice and rejected that of Cain.

Herein lies the importance for biblical religion of who has access to the revealed Word. What if the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran disagree about the suitable forms of worship?¹² Which forms will God accept and which will He reject? Here is the obstacle to all pluralism for those who claim to worship the same God, but rely on differing revelations. Centuries of rivalry and conflict — during which it was often those who thought their worship accepted who treated their brothers as Cain did Abel — bear witness to the importance of confronting this issue.¹³

An Approach to Biblical Theology

In order to show that biblical faith need not be antithetical to all religious pluralism, I shall now outline my own approach to Biblical Theology as a contemporary Jew rooted in the talmudic tradition.¹⁴ Although the categories and metaphors to be employed are characteristic of the biblical drama, I claim for this approach only that it is exegetically compatible with the central themes of the Bible, not that the Bible may not consistently be interpreted otherwise. The approach is offered for the consideration of others struggling to combine biblical faith commitments with a pluralistic religious outlook.

11. Compare Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, esp. I:79, 97–99, II:49, III:23, 37, 50–60.

12. *Ibid.*, I:2

13. Among serious Christian attempts to deal with this issue, see A. Roy Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers* (New York: Schocken, 1973); Paul van Buren, *Discerning the Way* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

14. A fuller account of this approach is given in my article "Divine Self-Limitation and Human Adequacy," forthcoming. See also *Joy and Responsibility* (*op. cit.*) Those who are familiar with the attempts of Rosenzweig, Buber and their generation to find a place for both Judaism and Christianity will notice that my approach is radically different. My understanding of religious pluralism does not treat it as an interim stage in history and makes no reliance on eschatology. On some other occasion I may write an explicit critique of their apologias.

The biblical drama is marked by a dialectical interaction between the themes of creation and revelation. The Torah begins with God acting in freedom and love to create the universe. Our very existence thus implies a relationship to God.¹⁵ But this elemental relationship does not involve any notion of election or history. All things created, animate and inanimate, are products of divine abundance and joy: “And God saw that it was good.” The relational experience that grows from human awareness of having been created may be termed the experience of “ontological relationship” to God. In the context of this relationship, divine love embraces all of being inasmuch as all beings are equally creations of one God. Through becoming conscious of his own situation, man becomes aware of the connectedness of all being bound together by virtue of the divine love expressed in creation.

The Jewish prayer book speaks of God “who in His goodness renews the act of creation continually each and every day,” implying that divine creation is an abiding feature of reality and not merely something that happened once. All things share an abiding ontological relationship to God. The joy of hearing a bird sing, of viewing a sunset, of feeling the wind — all can make one conscious of the sacred dimension of existence. All of life is sacred, because it all mirrors the loving power of the God of Creation.

Creation, however, also contains the seeds of the dialectical movement to history, since when man was created he was uniquely endowed with freedom. Human freedom gives rise to human rebellion and sin, thus initiating a process leading to divine revelation and election. Freedom allows mankind to become separated and estranged from God. Sin and estrangement introduce the principles of divine judgment and divine responsiveness. The God of Creation can remain non-discriminating: the whole of existence reflects equally the overflowing infinite energy of God. But when the unity of existence is ruptured by human estrangement, God’s attention is drawn to correcting the rupture in being by regaining man’s loyalty. The early chapters of Genesis relate various attempts of God to do this, which are frustrated by man’s repeated opposition to God’s will. A lasting solution does not begin before the story of Abraham and the introduction of the principle of election, whereby God seeks to create a community that will restore the primal relationship of being, not through existence as such, but through commitment and choice.

The relationship between man and God is now mediated through human freedom. God no longer simply speaks and produces results automatically as in creation (“And God said... and there was...”), but addresses man without the certainty of

15. See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (henceforth: *Guide*) III:53.

his response. With revelation and election, the arena of the God-man encounter shifts from nature to history.¹⁶ Because of the unpredictability of human history, the biblical drama now becomes truly dramatic. God, as it were, agrees to share the stage with man, to limit His own freedom and power so as to sustain human freedom, and to accept the risks of relating to man from within the context of history.

Whereas nature may be characterized in terms of constancy and eternal recurrence, history is a domain of freedom and risk — man can “choose life” or choose death (Deut. 30:15, 19). Freedom involves spontaneity which breaks the chain of eternal recurrence. Therefore divine involvement in human history does not begin, properly speaking, with Noah: the story of the flood is rather an attempt by God to reform nature once and for all, so as to be able to let nature take its course again thereafter. It is election, beginning with Abraham, that introduces a divine commitment to become permanently involved in the vagaries of human history.

Divine involvement in history gives rise to a vertical dimension in human consciousness, as may be seen in the concept of miracle. The latter represents divine spontaneity, divine action in history along the vertical which cuts the horizontal of the regularities of nature. Unlike Maimonides, who tried to absorb miracle in the framework of nature and saw creation as the paradigmatic miracle,¹⁷ I place the principle of miracle in history and see its paradigm in the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.¹⁸ In the biblical framework, miracle is not related to the God of being acting through nature; it is limited to particular relationships at particular moments in time. Because miracle presupposes history and human freedom, it also never changes the nature of man.

Miracle complements revelation, being an outgrowth of God’s addressing a specific community or individual in history. Whereas revelation may be defined as particularized vertical divine speech, miracle is a further expression of God’s saying: “I am intimately related to you in your unique situation. My saving power is not revealed exclusively in the universal drama of nature, but also within particularized human dramas.”¹⁹

16. According to the Midrash, until the election of Abraham “God, as it were, was king of heaven alone” and not yet “king of heaven *and earth*”. See Sifre, *Ha’azinu*, piska 313.

17. Maimonides, eighth chapter of *Eight Chapters* and *Guide* II:29. Maimonides’ motivation for this approach derives from a commitment to medieval Aristotelianism. But my concern is not with the metaphysical problem of whether the divine nature can be subject to change, but with the ethical problem of separating history from creation.

18. See Nachmanides on Ex. 12:2 and 20:2.

19. Compare Maimonides, *Guide* II:25.

It is in this context that the giving of the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai may be understood. *Revelation of law* involves a dialectical interaction between the vertical in terms of divine intervention and the horizontal in terms of the structure of human communal existence. Revelation establishing a community on the basis of Halakhah, the law developed from the Torah, bridges the gap between the spontaneity of the divine intrusion into history and the horizontal ordered patterns of the community. In contrast to Buber, who understands revelation and election in terms of radical spontaneity,²⁰ I interpret Sinai in terms of the revelation of law to a community that transcends pure spontaneity. Pure spontaneity is feasible for single individuals who live in a world of single individuals. If, however, the aim of revelation is to build a community, then spontaneity must be superseded or at least balanced by categories of structure and order. Revelation to a community for the sake of that community restores continuity and order to the dynamics of the divine encounter with man in history. Divine involvement in history must therefore transcend radical spontaneity and singular moments of surprise. Here I cannot accept Buber's view of revelation, sharing instead the orthodox Jewish view that the Sinai revelation established a community through *mitzvah* and Halakhah, which created a political and legal framework for the relationship of the community with God.

The Bible, then, allows one to distinguish between three types of God-man relationships:

- 1) Creation serves as the ground of the ontological relationship. I am because God is, therefore to be is to be in relationship to Him.
- 2) Freedom and the potential for sin start a process leading to a relationship through the unique encounter — revelation. The vertical ruptures the horizontal; God seeks ways of getting man to choose God. Miracle exemplifies God's relating to man in his particular situations rather than merely through the universal regularities of nature.
- 3) A third type of relationship arises when the vertical revelation of law creates a horizontal structure in the community. The question of election is concerned with this last type of God-man encounter.

The Particularity of Revelation

The understanding of revelation and election just outlined can allow due room for religious pluralism. The key concept involved is that of the particularity of revelation. Revelation is not made to universal man, but to a particular individual or a particular community. Just because of this particularity, it need not be un-

20. Martin Buber, *Moses* (New York: Harper, 1958), pp. 101–140. Also his letter published in Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. N.N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1955), pp. 111–112.

derstood to abrogate the validity of the faith experience of other religious communities.

Many Christians and Moslems may claim to possess a revelation valid for all mankind. In past centuries, certainly, Christian and Moslem theologians made such a claim, even if possibly neither Christianity nor Islam entertained that claim at the outset. But it is not my task to speak on behalf of Christians and Moslems, but only as a Jew. It is my understanding of Judaism that all statements about universal man are to be connected with creation: either with original creation, or with the reconstituted creation that followed the flood, or with creation “renewed continually each and every day.” Revelation belongs to the domain of history, not to that of creation, and the revelation at Sinai belongs to the history of the particular people Israel. The freedom and spontaneity of history are presupposed in Israel’s election, which implies the channeling of God’s interest into a particular context. The horizontal framework of Halakhah which structures the ongoing covenant of Israel to God grows out of a context expressing the particularity of the relationship between Israel and its God.

Here election represents a particularization of God’s relationship to man by way of divine involvement in history, but *without* implying that there can be only one exclusive mediator of the divine involvement in history. Consequently, theologians who claim that worship of the universal God is incompatible with election involving ethnic particularity are making a “category mistake.” The universal God is the God of Creation. It is God as the Lord of History who enters into specific relationships with human beings and who may be perceived in a particularistic manner. These two roles of God are simply distinct and not incompatible.

There are other views of Judaism. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, for instance, holds that the universalization of one’s faith commitment is deeply engrained in the heart of the biblical monotheist. He advocates Jewish-Christian dialogue, yet considers that each community — notwithstanding tolerance for and cooperation with one another — may continue to believe in the exclusive validity of its faith experience. You may advocate tolerance as a policy, but in your heart you hope for the ultimate universal triumph of your faith commitment when you announce to the whole world the establishment of the Kingdom of God.²¹

21. “... each faith community is unyielding in its eschatological expectations. It perceives the events at the end of time with exultant certainty, and expects man, by surrender of selfish pettiness and by consecration to the great destiny of life, to embrace the faith that this community has been preaching throughout the millenia.” Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6:2 (Spring-Summer 1964), p. 19.

Despite my great debt to my revered teacher, on this point my position is opposed to his. I believe that to universalize revelation is to blur the line separating the human from the divine. Revelation in history is always fragmentary and incomplete.²² Revelation expresses God's willingness to meet man in his finitude, in his particular historical and social situation, and to speak to him in his own language.²³ All of these constraints prevent one from universalizing the significance of the revelation. One cannot even automatically apply the revelation to later stages in the life of the community that received it: new human situations demand reinterpretation of the content of revelation. This is why commentary on the revelation becomes a continuing activity in the community.²⁴ While the commentator does not create an original independent work, he plays a creative role in determining the content of revelation. If there were no human dimension to the divine speech, there would be no need for commentary: one would simply listen and act.

It is not merely that revelation does not exhaust the plenitude of the divine, but rather revelation in history cannot be structured or made intelligible outside of the context of particularity. The universal God of Creation ontologically takes on the restriction of particularity when He meets man in history, because in addressing the human condition God must use a particularized form of speech. Revelation cannot be absorbed within the universal ontology of creation, because revelation in human history is always an address to man. This encounter of man with God, if it is not to be meaningless or overwhelming in the sense that man's finitude is overcome, must be made in such a way that the divine speech takes the recipient's finitude into account. The finitude of man constitutes a permanent element particularizing the way that the God of Creation enters into conversation with man in history.

22. "No word is God's last word." A.J. Heschel, "The Ecumenical Movement," *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 182.

23. The rabbinic dictum that "the Torah speaks in the language of men" is used by Maimonides to argue that one often has to understand biblical statements figuratively. In particular, anyone who takes literally biblical statements implying that God has a body is guilty of idolatrous worship. See *Guide*, esp. I:26 and I:36.

24. Commentary is not an unfolding of the infinite original content of the revelation, but rather the transition from one finite understanding in one situation to another finite understanding in another. Commentary, of course, may also correct, enhance or enlarge an existing understanding. The factor necessitating commentary is, therefore, not the infinite perfection of the revelation, as Scholem would have it, but the innate incompleteness of a revelation made in a finite human situation. Compare G. Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 282-303. The divine element in revelation provides structure, direction and the imperative to continue in a tradition.

A distinction must therefore be made between the figurative “speech” of creation, which is a pure expression of God not intended for a particular audience, and the human speech of God in revelation, which is fundamentally addressed to a particular community or individual. Creation expresses the overflowing wisdom and power of the divine. Revelation mirrors the conditioning of the divine by the human capacity to understand. If it is vain to imagine that the human condition can ever be transcended by man, revelation in history permanently contains the features of finitude.

Maimonides recognized clearly the distinction between the wisdom of God as manifested in revelation and the wisdom of God as manifested in nature. In his attempt to offer reasons for the commandments of the Torah and to show that all of biblical revelation is intelligible to human reason, he informs his readers that one must take into account the cultural conditions and context of the community at the time of the Sinai revelation in order to appreciate the purposes and intentions of the commandments. As an example, Maimonides explains the purpose of animal sacrifice in the Torah.²⁵ He points out that animal sacrifice was an accepted pattern of worship in Egypt, so much so that the Israelites would have been incapable of accepting an instruction to abandon it. Rather than risk having them reject the Torah as a whole, God made animal sacrifice a part of it. To ask the community to give up suddenly their accustomed form of worship would have been similar to asking rabbinic Jews, who used petitionary prayer as the way of expressing their need for and dependence on God, suddenly to worship without words and to meet God exclusively within a contemplative, philosophical framework. For Maimonides, the revelation of the law could not break with the limitations of the recipient of revelation. Biblical revelation reflects God as an educator who takes into account the limited capacities and habits of the recipient of his address.

God does not change the nature of man. If he did so, claims Maimonides, there would be no need for revelation, prophets and commandments.²⁶ God would achieve his goal in history by miraculously transforming the limited nature of man. Maimonides’ educative model of God’s activity in revelation, which draws upon the rabbinic tradition of God as teacher, would seem to imply that human listening is an essential feature of the way that the revelation of the universal God

25. *Guide* III:32. Cf. my *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), ch. 4.

26. *Guide, ibid.* The binding authority of law is grounded in other conditions than the claim of revelation. Concepts of authority, continuity and legal change are influenced by social and political considerations and not only by metaphysical theories of revelation. See *Guide* III:34, 41. Also Maimonides’ *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Shorēsh sheni, and Nachmanides *ad loc.* See my *Maimonides... (op. cit.)*, ch. 3.

of Creation is to be understood in history. It is for this reason that Maimonides believed that one gains greater understanding and knowledge of God through philosophical reflection upon nature than through reflection upon the commandments of the Torah.²⁷ Nature mirrors God in his pure self-sufficiency, in his pure unfolding, whereas revelation mirrors God's loving acceptance of man's weakness and permanent limitations. Given how Maimonides emphasizes the human contextual influence upon the revealed Word of God, the approach to revelation presented here can be seen to be very much in his spirit if one makes allowance for the polemical context of the medieval discussion.²⁸

The Greek tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle created the illusion that human reason can ascend to the level of divine thought and thereby liberate the individual from the limits of human finitude. When Christian, Islamic and Jewish theologians adopted this Greek notion of participation in the divine, they abandoned an essential feature of biblical religion, namely, creature consciousness. Medieval philosophers consequently had to make great efforts to justify the very need for revelation. What need is there for it if man participates in the divine through reason?

Revelation, as I understand it, was not meant to be a source of absolute, eternal and transcendent truth, but is God's speaking to man within the limited framework of human language and history. Reason and revelation are not competing sources of knowledge; it is not by virtue of its cognitive content that revelation is unique. Revelation is an expression of God's love and confirmation of man in terms of his finitude and creature consciousness. God does not compete intellectually with Plato or Aristotle. Revelation is God's speaking to man for the sake of man and not for the sake of uncovering the mysteries of the divine mind.

The otherness of God prevents man from attempting to overstep the boundaries of finitude. The biblical sense of mystery, transcendence and the holy are not necessarily meant to create self-negating terror and trembling before God, but rather above all to keep alive in man's consciousness the infinite and awesome gap that permanently separates the human from the divine. It is in this sense that I claim that human rationality should not be modeled upon the divine mind. The rational within human history is bounded by the concepts of human intelligibility and experience. Revelation which is given to man must be understood by finite human reason, as is implied by the rabbinic rejection of appeals to miracles and

27. E.g. *MT*, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, 2:1–2, 4:13, Ch. 10. Also my *Maimonides... (op. cit.)*, Ch. 5 and "The God of Abraham and the God of the Philosophers: Maimonides' Response to the Challenge of Philosophy," in *Joy and Responsibility*, pp. 162–197.

28. See note 5 above.

heavenly voices as acceptable ways of legitimizing an interpretation of scripture.²⁹

Man becomes an idolater when he believes that he can transcend the human condition. Hegelian philosophy of mind, for instance, is a pagan theory insofar as it blurs the distinction between the finite and the infinite, between creature and creator.³⁰ Mysticism can lead to an idolatrous equation of finite man with the Infinite God. If a person is preoccupied by God alone, he is liable to lose sight of the gap separating him from God because of his feeling of oneness with divinity.

It is one advantage of the contemporary world that we can be saved from such hubris because it is today much easier to encounter other persons of faith who disagree with us and thereby mirror our own limitations. There is nothing healthier for restoring humility to the human spirit than confronting people who disagree with you with dignity and conviction, just as there is nothing that liberates the human psyche more than marrying a person who is genuinely independent of you. Because Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are distinct spiritual ways warranting serious consideration, they bear witness to the complexity and fullness of the Infinite. The lack of unity within Christianity and within Judaism testifies to the radical diversity within human consciousness and to the rich mosaic of views and practices inspired by divinity in human history. Consciousness of the existence of multiple faith commitments is spiritually redemptive. It helps one to realize: 1) that one's own faith commitment does not exhaust the full range of spiritual options, and 2) that no human being can transcend the limitations of human finitude and comprehend the infinite reality of God.

The Jewish people had the opportunity to learn this lesson long before the twentieth century. Time and again it suffered for its stubbornness in resisting cultures and religious visions that aimed at universalization. As representative of particularity in history, its very existence was in many places and for long centuries treated as a scandal. Thus, although a tendency toward universalization existed in Judaism itself during the late biblical and early rabbinic periods, the lived history of the Jewish people in later times became a testimony to the evil that results from universalizing the particular.

29. See the classic dispute between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua in TB, Baba Metzia 59b over the "oven of Aknai." R. Eliezer tries to support his view by performing miracles and invoking a heavenly voice, but R. Joshua defeats him by arguing that the Torah prescribes procedures for its own interpretation which exclude resort to supernatural phenomena.

30. On this point, see Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 31–44.

A Jew can express loyalty to his tradition not only through allegiance to the Bible and the rabbinic literature, but also by recognizing the implications of the lived experience of his people: "And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel" (Lev. 22:32). We can respond halakhically to our past suffering by striving in the contemporary world to discover how religious pluralism can be spiritually redemptive. Thus the attempt to establish a secure framework for religious pluralism and tolerance in the state of Israel is not spiritually tangential to our national rebirth. The return of our own "scandal of particularity", to independent political existence affords us the opportunity, as the earliest carrier of biblical faith, of also taking a lead in acknowledging that revelation never exhausts the plenitude of creation. One bears witness to the God of Creation by rejoicing to live within the limits of one's own finitude.

Accordingly, I abhor all attempts at religious totalitarianism, whether it claims to speak in the name of the unique Lord of History or whether it bears some other mask. When the particularity of revelation is recognized, biblical faith does not have to seek to universalize itself. Seen from this perspective, we may be living in a redemptive period of history because religious pluralism has gained legitimacy in the eyes of so many people. Even when ecumenicism is explicable in terms of political motives, the very fact that people feel the need to appear tolerant and committed to pluralism, whatever their inner convictions, indicates how deeply pluralism has become engrained in the spirit of the age. In modern societies people have little patience with exclusivist doctrinaire religious attitudes. The secular democratic world and secular liberal society, despite their problems, have created conditions for the emergence of religious humility and help restrain man's propensity to universalize the particular.

A Pluralistic Understanding of Messianism

Although biblical revelation is made to a particular community and election is a divine commitment to involvement in a particular community's history, revelation and election are not thereby entirely without implications for the rest of the world. The very survival of the community presupposes some minimal constraints on the impact upon it of neighboring communities. This is only too evident in the case of ancient Israel, constantly faced with the threat of conquest or even obliteration by one of the surrounding empires. In those conditions there arose the messianic vision: the idea of a time when Israel would again have a king as mighty as David and when the gentiles would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer homage to the God of Israel. This vision accompanied the Jews during the centuries of exile after the fall of the Second Temple. Maimonides was less concerned with messianism than with the disembodied existence of the World to Come. Nonetheless, he also gave a rather traditional account of the messianic age: a mighty king would

restore Jewish rule throughout the Land of Israel and oblige the gentiles to obey the commandments incumbent upon all sons of Noah.³¹

While such a vision starts from the universal conditions necessary for the survival of the particular community, it obviously can turn into a vision of the universal triumph of that community's faith above all others. I shall therefore show that Jewish messianism need not have this consequence if the above-mentioned distinction between history and creation is maintained. It would be "bad faith" to advocate tolerance and pluralism in unredeemed history, yet maintain a triumphant monolithic universalism with regard to the end of days.

Creation is a metahistorical category in my theology. The creation story in Genesis is not a prolegomenon to history, it is not primeval history, but rather serves as a corrective to possible distortions of history. In particular, it implies that man should recognize the universal sanctity of life, since all life was given through the creative power of God. Here I follow a long tradition of Jewish understandings of Genesis. Nachmanides and many other Jewish commentators claim that initially mankind was forbidden to take the life of any animals. Only after animal life had been preserved from extinction by Noah's ark was mankind permitted to eat "every moving thing... as I gave you the green plants," and even then only without "its life, that is, its blood" (Gen. 9:3-4). Concerning mankind itself, the Mishnah asks: "Why was man created as a single person? To teach us that he who destroys one life is to be regarded as if he destroyed an entire world, and he who saves one life as if he saved an entire world."³² Commenting on this midrash, the Babylonian Talmud adds another one: God collected elements from the four corners of the earth in order to form the first man.³³ The implication of these two midrashim is that the principle of the sanctity of life may not be limited by considerations of race, color, nationality or creed. The principle of creation universalizes the sanctity of life and thereby goes beyond any historical particularization.

Creation may thus serve as a ground of ethics. An ethic based on the sanctity of life would satisfy Kant's condition of universalizability, since creation stands beyond history and is prior to both revelation and election. The ethical demands stemming from revelation are additional to those implied by creation and cannot contradict them. Conversely, as the talmudic sages were aware, norms that are exclusively derived from revelation ("Had they not been written, we *would not* have known them") need not be automatically universalized, whereas norms derived from creation ("Had they not been written, we *would* have known them")

31. See note 5 above.

32. Sanhedrin 4:5; see also Maimonides, *MT*, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 12:3.

33. Sanhedrin 38a; see further Tosefta, *Sanhedrin* 8.

apply universally to all human beings. The philosophical task of distinguishing between the two kinds of "oughts" is beyond the framework of this article; the point is mentioned to indicate the further development of an ethical theory based on the distinction between metahistorical creation and historical revelation.

The present task is to characterize messianism in terms of the universal ethical conception derived from creation. Faith commitments based on revelation require the universal *not* in order to universalize a particular revelation, but in order to universalize the ethical consciousness demanded by creation. No particular community can fully realize itself if the ethical fails to become embedded in human consciousness throughout the world. As long as violence or brutality are dominant anywhere in the world, no particular community can fully realize its unique spiritual way of life, since it has to adopt measures to counter the threat posed by such violence or brutality. Historical redemption is impossible so long as Eichmanns and Himmlers walk the earth. Herein lies the proper universal dimension of messianic aspirations. The messianic dream must be of a world in which all human beings realize that they were created in the image of God, that they all owe their existence to God, and that therefore all of life is sacred. Only then can the God of Creation reign in history.

The different ethical dimensions of creation and history may be further characterized in terms of justice and love respectively; Justice is universal; love is particular. I can respect the rights of all people everywhere, but I cannot love them all. Love is always of one's neighbor. We love those who are close to us; we are attached to the memories and customs of our own particular people. Love presupposes knowledge and intimacy ("And Adam knew Eve"), whereas justice must in many respects be blind. Those whom I do not love claim me ethically simply by virtue of their humanity.³⁴

Love is always particularized; those who seek to universalize it make it empty and meaningless. Contrary to what Erich Fromm claimed,³⁵ you never love universal man. You love a particular friend, not friendship. The passion of love is confined to the particular. Those who fail to recognize this feature of the human condition may become not only incapable of love, but blind to their capacity to hate.

Revelation implies that God accepts the limitations of human love and recognizes that human beings realize their human potential only within particular com-

34. See Genesis Rabbah for the discussion between Rabbi Akiva and ben Azzai over which is the central principle: "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18) or "in the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him" (Gen. 5:1).

35. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper, 1956).

munities. As a committed Jew, I love Judaism; I love my people's memories and my father's songs; I love Rabbi Akiva and Maimonides; I live in a particular city and am a citizen of a particular country. That space can become holy to God means that God allows the finite and particular to contain Him symbolically. This was God's message to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple (I Kings 8), and this is the meaning of the promised land: God allowed Himself to be mirrored for a particular people in a particular land.

Nevertheless, I live out my Judaism with great anticipation that one day all human beings will give up war and acknowledge the sacredness of life. Until there is a universal triumph of the ethical, history will remain a fragile and inhospitable home for man. Does that mean that all mankind must embrace my history or recognize its superiority? No. Messianism may aspire to see universal redemption through universal acknowledgement of the Creator God, that is, the principle of the sacredness of all life. The knowledge of God that will fill the earth on "that day" will be knowledge derived from creation over and above revelation.³⁶

Conclusion

The distinction between creation and history enables biblical faith to admit the possibility of religious pluralism without neutralizing the passion of commitment to the particular revelations of the biblical Lord of History. Revelation and election belong to the domain of history, wherein the individual community serves God in the manner mediated by the memories particular to itself. The radical particularization of history eliminates the necessity for faith communities to regard one another as rivals. Competition between faith traditions arises when universal dimensions are ascribed to historical revelation. When revelation is understood as the concretization of the universal, "Whose truth is *The Truth*?" becomes the paramount religious question and pluralism becomes a groundless religious ideal. But if revelation can be separated from the claim of universality and if a people of biblical faith can regain an appreciation of the particular that characterizes the divine-human encounter, then pluralism can become an integral part of biblical faith experiences.

The dream of a universal community under the Kingdom of God should be divorced from history; it becomes terribly dangerous when it is made the historical goal of a particular faith. The significance of the differences between communal particularities means that those who aspire to a universal community of the faithful are driven toward a universalism of the sword. The dream of a universal ethical awakening of human consciousness emerges not from the concepts of

36. Compare Maimonides, *MT*, Hilkhoh Melakhim 12.5 and *Guide* III:11.

community and history, but from the concept of creation. The Jew, the Christian and the Moslem are all one insofar as they are all creatures of God. One ought to respond to the sacredness of life common to all human beings irrespective of their way of worship. He who sheds the blood of any human being mars the image of God in the world.³⁷

The Jewish people suffered for centuries from the misplaced emphasis on history as the domain in which to establish universal religious truth. Our return to normalcy is a reassertion of the biblical covenant and thereby of the religious significance of particularity. We have returned not to a universal heavenly Jerusalem, but to a particular earthly Jerusalem, where we walked before God of old and walk before Him anew. The dream of history should not be the victory of one community over others, but that each should walk before God in the way that He taught it, while remembering that no particular community can claim to exhaust the will of the universal God of Creation.

Immanuel 16 (Summer 1983)

37. Compare the following midrash from Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Ba-hodesh* 5: How were the Ten Commandments arranged? Five on the one tablet and five on the other. On the one tablet was written: "I am the Lord thy God." And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "Thou shalt not murder." This tells that if one sheds blood it is accounted to him as though he diminished the divine image. To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province and the people set up portraits of him, made images of him and struck coins in his honor. Later on, they upset his portraits, broke his images, and defaced his coins, thus diminishing the likenesses of the king. So also if one sheds blood it is accounted to him as though he had diminished the divine image. For it is said: "Whoso sheddeth a man's blood... for in the image of God made He man" (Gen. 9:6).

See also Rabbi Akiva in Tosefta, Yebamoth 8.