EXPLORATIONS AND RESPONSES

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL:
THE INADEQUACY OF THE ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

Heschel on Interfaith Dialogue

It is appropriate to consider Abraham Joshua Heschel's view of interfaith dialogue now, some twenty years after his death. He set forth his views explicitly in an essay, published first in 1966, which was a play on one of the "Devotions" of the poet John Donne (1573-1631). The original poem contains the following lines: "No man is an Iland, intire of itselfe . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." Heschel entitled his essay "No Religion Is an Island" and expressed thoughts not far from those of the poet.1

Heschel began by recalling his cremated roots in Eastern Europe and asserted that we cannot be like the delirious patient who cries, "[T]he doctor is dead."2 He thus began by denying the death of God in the extermination camps. Heschel then went on to evoke two points that all religions have in common, which are basic to an interfaith reconstruction of the world after the Holocaust:

(1) All religions must deny cynicism and nihilism. All religions must realize that, as the title of his essay indicated, no religion has the strength to fight evil alone. All religions have a social, conventional dimension in which the holy works itself out. Therefore, all religions must fight evil mightily.

(2) All religions share humanness and religious awareness and sensibilities. No religion can adequately express the ultimate; all answers are tentative. All religions must witness personally both to the experience of the holy and to sin. As Heschel put it: "The recognition that we are [children] in obeying God and praising Him is the starting-point of my reflection. 'I am a companion of all who fear [You], of those who keep [Your] precepts' (Psalms 119:63) . . . The first and most important prerequisite of interfaith is faith."3 "Holiness is not the monopoly of any particular religion or tradition. Wher-

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2Ibid., p. 344.
3Ibid., pp. 349-350; I have revised Heschel's original text slightly in order to use the contemporary inclusive language that I believe he would use if he were writing today.

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ever a deed is done in accord with the will of God, wherever a thought of [humankind] is directed toward [God], there is the holy."\textsuperscript{4}

On the special relationship between Judaism and Christianity, Heschel noted four important points:

First, the Bible, that is, God's presence in the Bible, is basic. Furthermore, it is God's pathos, God's feeling sympathy, God's loving concern that is basic. Second, "Both of us must realize that in our age anti-Semitism is anti-Christianity and that anti-Christianity is anti-Semitism."\textsuperscript{5}

Third,

Some [Christian] theologians continue to act as if they did not know the meaning of "honor your father and mother"; others, anxious to prove the superiority of the church, speak as if they suffered from a spiritual Oedipus complex.

A Christian ought to realize that a world without Israel will be a world without the God of Israel. A Jew, on the other hand, ought to acknowledge the eminent role and part of Christianity in God's design for the redemption of all [people].\textsuperscript{6}

"Leading Jewish authorities, such as Jehuda Halevi and Maimonides, acknowledge Christianity to be preparatio messianica ... a divine plan in the role of Christianity within the history of redemption."\textsuperscript{7}

Fourth, "[A]ny conversation between Christian and Jew in which abandonment of the other partner's faith is a silent hope must be regarded as offensive to one's religious and human dignity."\textsuperscript{8} "In this aeon diversity of religions is the will of God."\textsuperscript{9}

Religions, I repeat, true to their own convictions, disagree profoundly and are in opposition to one another on matters of doctrine. However, if we accept the prophet's thesis that they all worship one God, even without knowing it, if we accept the principle that the majesty of God transcends the dignity of religion, should we not regard a divergent religion as His Majesty's loyal opposition?\textsuperscript{10}

These, then, were Heschel's post-Holocaust commandments for interfaith dialogue: Do not be cynical. Strive in cooperation against social evils. Work on the basis of shared faith. And, specifically for Christian-Jewish dialogue: Be rooted in God's faithful presence as depicted in the Bible. Recognize one another's different yet necessary roles in God's ultimate plan for the salvation of humankind. Do not be antisemitic. Do not proselytize. Heschel's view on proper interfaith relations is a natural outgrowth of his God-centered theology and, hence, is consistent with his other positions in the field of social action.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., p. 357.
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., p. 344.
\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., p. 351.
\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., pp. 357-358.
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., p. 352.
\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., p. 353.
\textsuperscript{10}Ibid.
In all of this, Heschel was the epitome of what S. Daniel Breslauer has called "the ecumenical perspective." Advocates of this position, which evolved after World War II, taught that all religions share one reality that transcends all, that through faithfulness in personal and social existence one can give concrete expression to that transcendent reality, that religious pluralism must be the byword of post-war existence, and that all religions have a common enemy in secular modernization, which produces impersonalism, exploitation, and the other social evils of our time.

This ecumenical perspective contrasts nicely with the pre-war attitude, also outlined by Breslauer, of the inherent immiscibility of religious traditions. Advocates of this view, such as Martin Buber and Mordecai Kaplan, taught that each religion is a self-contained entity struggling to articulate itself and that the best one can attain in the way of dialogue is the ability to look into the window of the neighbor's house, that is, to be a polite, intelligent, sensitive spectator. Simply put, no religion has inherent relevance for another.

Critique and Suggestion

How adequate is Heschel's view of interfaith dialogue in particular and of religion in general? As I observe the growth of neo-orthodoxy and neo-fundamentalism in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic circles, I see that the ecumenical perspective has shifted from the center of interfaith relations. The pendulum has swung from sensitive dialogue to grudging coexistence, from embracing universalism to truculent particularism. One does not hear often about genuine pluralism, about repudiating the mission to the Jews, about Judaism and Christianity's jointly working toward a better age, and so on. Rather, one hears of dispensationalism (seeing the State of Israel as a prelude to the second coming of Jesus), of supersessionism (the doctrine that the church has superseded the Jews as the true Israel), of Jews for Jesus, of the mission to the Jews as being an integral part of the Great Commission, of literalist readings of scripture, of anti-Zionism that denies it is anti-Jewish, of the academic study of religion that is intended to "save" Judaism from becoming parochial, of excessive Christian guilt over the Holocaust's inhibiting Christian criticism of the State of Israel, of Jewish over-sensitivity to criticism of Israel, of rigid Jewish particularism in an age of universalism, and so on.

Sociodynamically, the issue today is the behavior of the Jews in the Jewish State, perceived and portrayed as powerful, arrogant, exploitative, even fascist. Further, it is the behavior of the Jews in the exile, perceived and portrayed as secretive, power-wielding, blindly cliquish, and subversive. Theologically, the issues are covenant, chosenness, law, guilt, and grace-through-faith—all ab-

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solutes, none rooted in the poetry of the common human awareness of the holy.

The ecumenical perspective, very much embodied by Abraham Joshua Heschel, resonates deeply for those of us who were, like myself, brought up in the 1950's, 1960's, and early 1970's. We want to believe that religions have something in common, that this commonality is the basis for a pluralistic and, hence, tolerant view of one another and that it also serves as the base for common sociomoral, prophetic action. But, is it so? I think that the ecumenical window has closed, that that moment has passed by, in favor of a tougher understanding of the irreconcilabilities of religious coexistence. I think that a certain silent self-superiority has reasserted itself, undermining all but the unavoidable necessities of coexistence in a free society.

I foresee a period of increasing self-assertiveness, even belligerency, in interfaith work. Jews will ask: Why cannot Christians just surrender their need to proselytize us? Why can Christians not accept that Jews are largely not interested in religion but in history and culture? Why can Christians not understand that loyalty to the State of Israel is the litmus test of Jewish existence and, therefore, of interfaith dialogue, especially since we failed the test earlier this century? How can Christians, who do not see themselves as a minority and do not have their fate in the hands of others, be so confident about existence? Why are Christians really interested in interfaith dialogue? What is their hidden agenda?

Christians will ask: Why do Jews tolerate civil and political abuses in the State of Israel that they would never tolerate anywhere else? Why can Jews not see that our understanding of our faith, not a secret Antisemitism, compels us to take up the cause of the Palestinians? Why cannot Jews take prayer, faith, grace, and love more seriously? Why must Jews harp on the Holocaust? Why must they “proselytize” us on the State of Israel? Why must Jews be so insecure, not trusting anyone to help guarantee their existence?

Finally, Jews are increasingly tired of trying to justify their existence to Christians. They want to be left alone to pursue their communal and cultural affairs without having to take into consideration what their Christian neighbors will think, without having to cope with subtle and not-so-subtle forms of Antisemitism. Christians, too, are increasingly tired of explaining that Jesus is more than a wayward rabbi, a false Messiah, or an inquisitor. They want Jews to take Christianity seriously as a religion, not just as a partner in social-justice issues.

These questions have scarcely been raised in dialogue, yet they seem to me to be the basic issues. It is no longer enough to point to a common sense

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12 As scholars of intertextuality have noted, every text is a mimesis of another text. I freely admit that Heschel is the text I imitate: the poetry, the vision of humanity, the centrality of God. I admit, too, that the ecumenical vision in which Heschel is set and to which he contributed does create a framework in which I wish to be accepted. In that sense, the ecumenical perspective was and is, indeed, an aspect of the accommodation of modern Jews to the modern Christian milieu.
of the holy and a common agendum of sociomoral, prophetic causes. We need
dialogue—talking from the heart about what ails the heart, about fears and
prejudices, about anger.

I do not think that all this is bad: it may even be good. It may be a sign of
our testing our acceptance of one another, a kind of aggressive "consumer
protectionism," or an agonistic intellectualism. It is closer to the truth to say
that we suspect one another than to say that we love, or even respect, one
another. The truth is almost always better than a half-truth; the truth shall set
you free.

There will always be ecumenists, persons devoted to the idea that religions
share a sense of the holy and a mission to embody that holiness in our social
lives. If there is to be interfaith dialogue and not interreligious war, I see no
alternative presupposition. However, we are entering a tough time for that
ideology, a time when that ideology will have to get its hands dirty with the
frustrations and resentments of daily living. We will have to get to know and
to accept one another's genuine differences. We will have to develop a sense
of investment in one another's positions. But, this can only come after honest
questioning, even on subjects that are unpleasant. The closing decade of this
century will tell us a great deal about who we were and who we can yet become.

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Errata

The editors apologize to a longtime Associate Editor and a previous Guest Editor for errors in
their names in the Ecumenical Resources section of J.E.S., vol. 29, no. 1 (Winter, 1992). On p. 152,
in a listing for Dialogue and Alliance (Spring, 1989), Franklin M. Littell should read: Franklin H.
Littell. On p. 154, in a listing for the Lutheran Quarterly (Autumn, 1989), Daniel F. Martenson
should read: Daniel F. Martensen.