

The Jewish View of Inter-religious Dialogue

— A Spontaneous Presentation —

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I have decided to respond this morning from immediate spontaneity out of this dialogic situation rather than presenting a formal paper. Last night we participated in an exercise in abstruse Buddhist scholasticism. Professor Abe described different ways of using absolute, some more conducive than others to openness. He said that the Buddhist absolute creates the possibility of openness which is not true in the Christian use of absolute. What is basic is whether we are using descriptive or prescriptive, normative categories. It is more important what people mean when they use words, not what the words themselves mean.

The words, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, etc., don't appear in any sacred text, but, nevertheless, a man's experience of ultimate reality crystallizes for him around Jesus, Buddha, etc., and creates an historical reality. The words Christian, Buddhist, etc., are merely ciphers or symbols.

Since I am a comparative religion teacher, I realize the limitations of that discipline. Comparative religion may not be legitimate in inter-religious dialogue, but I will use the comparative method to enable me to (1) avoid arbitrary prescrip-

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tions, i.e., not "Judaism says" but rather how Jews have reacted, developed, expressed themselves through history; and (2) assess the possibilities of dialogue in the future with other religions.

The world is pluralistic (we take this for granted) and should be (we say), therefore, exclusiveness is a bad thing. So the fashionable modern categories are commitment, etc. However, even here we are dealing with a pre-selective pluralism, e.g., only certain religions, "worthy religions," are included in this and the following conference. That is why I prefer the phrase dialogue of "living men of faiths," rather than dialogue of "men of living faiths," as others have put it in this consultation. In an acceptance of pluralism we sometimes say that "men prefer different composers, but all enjoy music." However, some religions say more is at stake than this. We must explore the relative adequacy of our alternative crutches, our language systems. The Sufi poets were concerned with the expressions of individual minds, but they also revealed the dynamism of religious movements.

As to this much-discussed concept of tolerance, there are different types of tolerance and intolerance. Actually, all of us are intolerant by nature. A baby is extremely intolerant and has to learn to build up relations with other things. We have to learn to tolerate others and ourselves. The three categories of intolerance are as follows:

- 1) practical and theoretical intolerance: Christianity is by its nature dogmatically or theoretically intolerant;
- 2) extensive and intensive intolerance: this can be seen in the identity of religion with nation-building where there is uniformity within a country but extensive tolerance;
- 3) formal and material intolerance: every religion has formal intolerance, even in China the concept that the three religions were one, i.e.,

Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, was disputed by Dōgen.

The Biblical religion and Islam were a revolt against the ancient Semitic religions. They recognized that religion has national life, but Judaism added another element, namely, that their God was the universal God. Ancient Judaism, therefore, was exclusive inherently from the beginning. The name of God was very important to them. It identified a specific identity; it was an affirmation of one thing and, necessarily, a denial of another thing. This is specific exclusiveness and shows the basic inbuilt dualism of Judaism.

In the prophet Micah's words we seem to find formal tolerance: "You worship your God and we'll worship ours." However, Judaism, as a nation, is intensively intolerant and only extensively tolerant. Therefore, Judaism is a national identity with a spiritual identity. Historically, there have been different interpretations and living of the faith, but the decisive thing is not the differences within history, because the people inside a tradition are not really aware of these differences.

The specific thing about Judaism is that there is a people with a future and past destiny within a spiritual framework. This thinking leads to exclusivism and theoretical intolerance. The relevance of all this today is that the Jew is caught between, on the positive side, his pluralistic attitude and, on the negative side, a theology of theoretical rejection of others. The problem is how to retain the tradition of pluralism while shedding the intransigence of theoretical intolerance. But this intolerance is theoretical. Only real particularistic people are real universalists and vice versa.

To achieve this tightrope walking, we must engage in inter-religious dialogue with a philosophic basis. To carry on such a dialogue, we must resort to language, but the important thing is what value we actually attach to this language. The important thing is what the relationship of the language we use is to things we are aiming at. We must also keep in mind the relationship of one symbol system to another when we are conducting inter-religious dialogue.

We will always have confrontation and the problem of relating and translating between symbol systems in inter-religious dialogue. The relation of our symbol systems to reality cannot be really got at by dialogue. However, it is our experience of sameness and otherness which forces on us, as Jews within our exclusivist tradition, the necessity of dialogue. It is this experience of our common humanity and our ultimate isolation which impels Jews to dialogue with other religions.