

Orthodox Judaism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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In recent decades a concept that was historically more suited to Christianity than the critical tradition of rabbinic Judaism has become commonplace within the Orthodox Jewish community – namely the idea of “*da’at Torah*,” indicative of an ex cathedra authority of Torah scholars, not only impervious to verification or analysis but even viewing the latter as a form of impiety.¹

Paradoxically this virus has even infected modern Orthodoxy, or centrist Orthodoxy as some prefer to describe it, which in the past had prided itself on its greater intellectual rigor. A striking example of this is in the U.S. where the person of the late Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik has acquired almost iconic stature, especially as the institution with which he was so closely identified, Yeshiva University, is the main single “producer” of U.S. Orthodox rabbis. Accordingly strictures attributed to “the Rav,” as he is called, have acquired the status of “holy writ” in the life of modern or centrist Orthodoxy in the U.S.²

This is the case regarding the position Rabbi Soloveitchik outlined in his now famous article published in *Tradition* (Vol.6 no.2, spring/summer 1964, 528), dealing with Jewish-Christian relations, in which he made a distinction between social and political issues of mutual concern (on which Jewish-Christian cooperation is encouraged) and theological dialogue (which is frowned upon!). What lay behind the need to make this distinction has been open to different interpretations. The late Rabbi Prof. Pinchas Peli claimed that Rabbi Soloveitchik told him explicitly that his concern was but to ensure that only those rabbis well educated enough to engage in theological dialogue with Christians be encouraged to do so.³ Moreover, many disciples attest to the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik himself participated in a number of interfaith dialogues.⁴

However Rabbi Soloveitchik’s concerns are made quite explicit in the article in *Tradition*. While he does question the very possibility of the dialogue across a theological divide, his profound concern relates to what he views as the imbalance in the relationship of “the few and weak vis-à-vis the many and the strong” and appeals to friends within the Christian “community of the many” to respect “the right of the community of the few to live, create and worship in its own way in freedom and with dignity.” Thus – not unrelated to his own profound sense of alienation in the world, so central to his existential philosophy – Rabbi Soloveitchik reveals that his concerns are inextricably bound up with past tragic Jewish experience within Christendom and the danger that dialogue will simply be a polemic if not conversionary tool.⁵ It is noteworthy that he wrote his article before the promulgation of

Nostra Aetate and the most radical changes within the Christian world towards Jews and Judaism and one might wonder whether he held the same position in their wake.

Indeed, this position of Rabbi Soloveitchik's was critiqued forcefully by the late Israeli Orthodox Professor Zvi Yaron⁶ for failing to recognize not only the changed status of the Christian world and the fact that in modern secular society, all religions are minorities; but above all, the changed condition of the Jewish people after the establishment of the State of Israel. Indeed Yaron suggests that Soloveitchik's use of the term "faith community" (which Yaron considers to be an "utterly new" term in Jewish usage), is precisely employed to avoid the full implications of Jewish statehood! Yaron not only rejects Soloveitchik's reservations, but describes Jewish-Christian dialogue as a "*Mitzvah*" – a religious duty!

Other Orthodox thinkers have questioned Rabbi Soloveitchik's view of the "theological impossibility" of genuine Jewish-Christian dialogue. British Rabbi Norman Solomon expounds upon the theology of Paul Van Buren to affirm that maintaining those absolute particularities of one's faith, "need neither stop the conversation nor commence browbeating", as "there are still ways to 'walk together' ... (and) one can (even) attempt to 'unpack' the (other's) mystery even if this leads to some uncomfortable questions."⁷

Rabbi David Hartman has also taken issue with "the Soloveitchik line," declaring that "revelation in history is always fragmentary and incomplete" and that interfaith dialogue is an imperative to "help one realize that one's own faith commitment does not exhaust the full range of spiritual options and that no human being can transcend the limitations of human finitude and comprehend the infinite reality of God."⁸

Long before I discovered Hartman's writings on the subject, this perception served as the basis for my own journey into the vineyard of interfaith dialogue, which itself was a product of my Jewish concern for and commitment to social justice as a religious leader in South Africa. In encountering the religious "other," I began to understand that it is in fact idolatrous for any one religion to claim that it can encapsulate the totality of the Divine; if the daily encounter with the Divine involves the human encounter with those created in the Divine Image, then that experience of the Divine in the other is at its most intense when the other is conscious of the Divine Presence in his/her life⁹ and thus the respectful and non-proselytizing encounter is in fact a religious experience in itself.

As a European and an Israeli, I had been unaware of "the Soloveitchik line" until after I became Chief Rabbi of Ireland and was already deeply immersed in Jewish-Christian relations both in the field and in academia. However, when I learned of it, it seemed to me

to be very questionable, precisely from a Jewish viewpoint. The very idea of “theology” as something set apart is debatable from a Jewish perspective. Precisely because Judaism sees everything in relation to the Divine, even the discussion of the weather between believers is a theological discussion. It seems to me to be quite artificial to make a distinction between social and political issues on the one hand and theological on the other. Indeed as a religious Zionist, I would present issues relating to Israel as a most glaring example of such inextricability! In fact it seems to me that this is what the prophet Malachi indicates in Ch. 3 v. 16 when he describes Divine approval (and record) of the very conversation of believers.

Accordingly, I find the ultra-Orthodox position against dialogue altogether to be far more intellectually respectable than what I view as a very questionable distinction between social and political on the one hand and theological on the other. We may choose to place limits upon the character and scope of interfaith dialogue, but it is inevitably theological, almost by definition. Indeed this is implicit, if not explicit, already in Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri’s description of Christianity and Islam as “peoples bound by the ways of true religion,”¹⁰ in the words of Rabbi Moses Rivkes (Beer Hagolah) recognizing the biblical and theological connections between Christianity and Judaism,¹¹ in Rabbi Yaacov Emden’s description of Christianity as a “*knessiyah leshem shamayim, shesofah lehitkayem*,”¹² and in the writings of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik’s own uncle Rabbi Eliahu Soloveitchik in his work “Kol Koreh.”

Contained within these views of Christianity is another – arguably even higher – imperative for advancing Christian-Jewish relations beyond those aforementioned (and the legitimate needs of “defense”), which to my mind demonstrates no less forcibly just how “theological” interreligious cooperation on social issues is. Any recognition of shared commitment to God’s presence revealed both in Creation and in History and to His word revealed in the Hebrew Bible, places special responsibility upon us towards those who also affirm it; making us, whether we like it or not, partners in the pursuit of the Universal Kingdom of Heaven on earth in keeping with that Biblical vision. This might be a particularly difficult idea for many Jews to digest, primarily for historical reasons. However, the fact that all too often so-called Christian behavior towards Jews made a mockery of the Christian gospel, should not blind us to the content of the latter that espouses what Rivkes describes as “the main principles of religion” that emanate from the belief in God as Lord of the Creation and of the Exodus.

Accordingly the very fact that that message has been perverted in the name of Christianity should precisely itself be of concern to us as Jews. For the desecration of those values distances us and our world from the ultimate Messianic vision, just as their espousal brings us closer to it. What I am advocating here may sound very strange to Jewish ears!

However, we should consider it seriously if we are to be loyal to our supreme charge. If Christianity is acknowledged to espouse beliefs and values that the Jewish people believe to be amongst those fundamental teachings that it brought to the world and for which it was elected, and as Judaism aspires for their recognition and fulfillment in the whole world, then their desecration, especially by those claiming to represent these beliefs and values among the Gentiles, must be our Jewish concern. Such a "*chilul HaShem*," desecration of the Divine name, demands our attention too! The positive image of Christianity as a bearer of such values is relevant to our own holy task of *Kiddush HaShem*, sanctifying God's name! Moreover, in that desecration that has been perpetrated in the past in the name of Christianity, not only have we suffered so greatly as a people, but the image of our own testimony and purpose has been perverted as well! By correcting this distortion and by restoring and promoting the image and glory of our Torah through dialogue and joint co-operation, we rectify the desecration of God's Name and sanctify it instead. This sanctification of the Divine name amongst the nations is a pre-eminent religious responsibility, fundamental to Israel's purpose and destiny.¹³ Thus through working together towards goals that we share, we not only are stronger than the sum of our different parts in working for common goals and a substantially shared hope for the establishment of a world that lives in accordance with God's "moral ways," but we are also partners in the principle biblical charge itself "to sanctify God's Name" in the world.

¹ See Laurence Kaplan and Moshe Sokol's articles in *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, The Orthodox Forum Series: publ. Jason Aronson, 1992.

² As opposed to Europe, for example.

³ Lecture at the Jerusalem Rainbow Group, Winter 1988 – a position confirmed by Rabbi Prof. David Hartman.

⁴ Testimony from both the abovementioned rabbis and Rabbi Yitzhak Rubin of Jerusalem.

⁵ Indeed the abovementioned comments of Rabbis Peli and Hartman make additional sense in this light.

⁶ *Face to Face*, the Interreligious Bulletin, Vol II Winter/Spring, 1977. "An Orthodox Jewish Israeli Views Interfaith"

⁷ "The Context of Jewish-Christian Relations", *Jewish-Christian Relations*, Vol. 24. No. 1 & 2, Winter 1991.

⁸ "On the possibilities of Religious Pluralism from a Jewish viewpoint", *Immanuel* No. 16, Summer 1983.

⁹ It seems to me that this is the fuller meaning of the words of Rabbi Akiva in the Mishna – *Pirkei Avot*, Ch. 2, m. 14.

¹⁰ *Bet HaBechirah*, *Avodah Zarah* 2b, 22a, 2ba; *Bava Kama* 113b; *Bava Metzia* 27a.

¹¹ *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 15b; *Choshen Mishpat*, 425.

¹² *Seder Olam Rabba*, 33-35, *Sefer HaShimush* 15-17.

¹³ *Exodus* ch. 32 v. 12; *Numbers* ch. 14 v.13-16; *Deuteronomy* ch. 9 v. 28; *Ezekiel* ch. 36 v. 22-23; *Genesis Rabbah* 49, 16; *Yalkut*, *Deut* ch. 6 v. 5; *Seder Eliahu Rabbah* ch. 26; *Tosefta Bava Kama* ch. 10; *Maimonides Hilchot Eduyot* ch. 1 hal. 2