Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

Heschel's View of Religious Diversity

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Volume 2, Issue 2 (2007): 19-25

http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol2/iss2/

A few weeks before he died in 1972, my teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, left the following message for young people: "And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. You're not a machine. And you are young. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence."[1]

If what Heschel says is true, if one's life is meant to be a work of art, then Heschel's life was a masterpiece. He was one of the most significant religious thinkers of the last century who, at the same time, was deeply engaged in the social issues of his day. He was a passionately committed Jew and an "apostle to the gentiles" who was revered by many Christians and considered a *tzaddik*, a saint, by Jews. He was a major figure in both the peace movement opposed to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, and he worked vigorously to help Jews suffering in the Soviet Union. What stood out about Heschel was his ability to speak as a Jew, but a Jew who could communicate beyond the boundaries of his own religious tradition. The Catholic theologian John Merkle said it best: "In his own life and works, Abraham Joshua Heschel revealed the supreme importance of God as well as what it is like to live with faith in God."[2]

In his essay "Heschel's Impact on Catholic-Jewish Relations," Eugene Fisher, former executive secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, writes:

> Heschel's work and life, of course, were particularly profound in their influence on American Catholics of my generation. His thought spiritually enriched us as his courageous deeds – whether marching for civil rights or against the Vietnam War – prophetically challenged us. To many of us in the Catholic community active in the 1960s, Abraham Joshua Heschel, along with Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, were perceived as no less than contemporary prophets, searing our souls and enflaming our vision with God's hope for a better humanity. Through him we learned to understand, to feel, what it means to say that the Bible is the living word of God.[3]

Further, Heschel played a major role in shaping the Church's view of Judaism. He was the most important Jewish voice during the meeting of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Heschel spent a great deal of time with Augustine Cardinal Bea, S.J., who, at that time, headed the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and was responsible for drafting the Church's revolutionary renunciation of anti-Semitism in *Nostra Aetate*. Heschel even convinced Pope Paul VI to remove an offensive paragraph that (against Cardinal Bea's wishes) called for Jews to convert to Christianity. After this document came out, Heschel said that what was of greatest significance for him was "the omission of any reference to conversion of the Jews."[4]

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, in "Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays: Abraham Joshua Heschel*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 412.

[2] John C. Merkle, *The Genesis of Faith: The Depth Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985), 26.

[3] Eugene J. Fisher, "Heschel's Impact on Catholic-Jewish Relations," in *No Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 111.

[4] Quoted in "Session VIII: Discussion" in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*: *International Theological Conference, University of Notre Dame: March 2-16, 1966*, ed. John H. Miller (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 373.

Heschel was beloved by Christians, especially by Catholics, for his profound religious thought and for the inspiring way he lived. But what did Heschel think of Christianity, as well as other traditions? Did he feel that Judaism was the only true religion? Did he feel that all religions are equally valid? How did this committed Jewish thinker grapple with the question of religious difference?

Many Christian theologians consider religious diversity to be one of the most important issues of our time. It is now nearly fifty years since the distinguished Christian theologian and historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith spoke these words concerning religious diversity: "This is really as big an issue, almost, as the question of how one accounts theologically for evi l– but Christian theologians have been much more conscious of the fact of evil than that of religious pluralism."[5] Since that time, numerous Christian theologians have struggled to arrive at a Christian theology of religions that would be consistent with the new awareness of religious diversity.

A number of prominent Christian theologians who have contemplated the issue of religious diversity speak of three major models: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist.[6] Traditionally, Christians, like believers of many other faiths concerning their religion, have seen Christianity as the only true path to salvation and all other paths as false. This is the exclusivist view.

The inclusivist view is more positive about other religions. According to this approach, the grace of Christ is present in other traditions; therefore, members of other religions may attain salvation. The inclusivist view, which had advocates in the early Church, was developed in great detail by the eminent Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984). Rahner, who was very influential in the Second Vatican Council, claimed the Christian tradition is "the absolute religion, intended for all men, which can't recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right."[7] However, since God desires to save all human beings, "there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions."[8] Pope John Paul II, the world's most famous inclusivist, stated, "Respect and esteem for the other and for what he has in the depths of his heart is essential to dialogue."[9]

Pluralism takes an even more expansive view of other religions. Paul Knitter, a prominent Catholic theologian, has presented the pluralist perspective in a most perceptive and persuasive way: "Other religions *may be* just as effective and successful in bringing their followers to truth, and peace, and well-being with God as Christianity has been for Christians. . . . Only if Christians are truly open to the possibility . . . that there *are* many true, saving religions and that Christianity is one among the ways in which God has touched and

[5] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 121.

[6] Alan Race, editor of the journal *Interreligious Insight*, develops these models in great detail. See his book *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

[7] Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 56.

[8] Ibid., 61.

[9] Pope John Paul II, "To Representatives of the Shinto Religion," Rome, February 28, 1979, in *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church 1963–1995*, ed. Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 218.

transformed our world – only then can authentic dialogue take place."[10]

John Hick, the best-known exponent of the pluralist position, explains that for the pluralist it is fundamental that one not elevate one's own religion "as uniquely superior to all the others."[11] This means, among other things, that when we come to metaphysical claims about God we cannot consider a vision of a personal God as superior to an impersonal one. We cannot say that mysticism of personality is superior to mysticism of infinity or that theistic mysticism is superior to monistic mysticism. With regard to sacred texts, the religious pluralist will say that he or she is committed to following the Torah or the Vedas or the Qu'ran or the New Testament not because that sacred text is superior to other sacred texts but because it is the sacred text of his or her religious tradition.

Generally, Jewish thinkers have not given the same level of attention to religious diversity as have Christian theologians. Heschel remains the most significant Jewish thinker to address this critical issue. In his essay "No Religion Is an Island," he presents a radical view of the world's religions. Heschel argues that no religion has a monopoly on truth or holiness and says, "In this aeon diversity of religions is the will of God."[12]

This statement is certainly open to different interpretations. I believe that it means that Heschel accepted the validity of other religious traditions. By saying that religions are the will of God, I believe he means there is also a divine element in these traditions. Heschel cites a Talmudic source that clearly supports this interpretation. "It is a well-established tradition in Jewish literature that the Lord sent prophets to the nations, and even addressed Himself directly to them."[13] According to Heschel, "The Jews do not maintain that the way of the Torah is the only way of serving God."[14]

Long before Heschel, the Jewish tradition taught that the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come. Heschel cites a rabbinic source that I consider important for our time: "I call heaven and earth to witness that the Holy Spirit rests upon each person, Jew or Gentile, man or woman, master or slave, in consonance with his deeds."[15]

For Heschel, it is less important what religious path people follow than that they show compassion for their fellow human beings. For Heschel, "Religion is a means, not an end."[16] He says: "The prophets convey to us the certainty that human life is sacred, that the most important thing a person can do is to have compassion for his fellow man."[17] The end of religion is to ennoble, to refine, to transform us so that we

[10] Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 30.

[11] John Hick, "The Next Step beyond Dialogue," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism,* ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 6.

[12] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," in *No Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin (Maryknoll, NY: 1991), 14.

[13] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 226.

[14] "No Religion Is an Island," 19.

[15] Ibid., 18.

[16] Abraham Joshua Heschel, in conversation with Patrick Granfield, as quoted by Granfield in his *Theologians at Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 78.

[17] Abraham Joshua Heschel, in "Two Conversations with Abraham Joshua Heschel," transcript of "The Eternal Light" program, The National Broadcasting Company, March 19, 1972, Part I, p. 8. Heschel was interviewed by Rabbi Wolfe Kelman.

really have concern for others – which makes us truly human. This teaching is in keeping with his idea that God's outstanding characteristic is "divine pathos." In Heschel's mind, the ultimate goal of human life is to care about humanity as much as God does. This vision enables him to see the saintliness in many of the Christians whom he encountered.

In view of Heschel's stress that "diversity of religions is the will of God" and that "the Jews do not maintain that the way of the Torah is the only way of serving God," should we then see him as a Jewish pluralist? While Heschel sees all religions as valid, he does not see them as fundamentally equal. A study of Heschel's works reveals that he was quite familiar with some of the primary sources of Christianity and Islam as well as those of Hinduism and Buddhism. In his interpretation of these sources, he stresses the unique aspects of each religion, its distinctiveness and particularity. He is critical of certain aspects of Asian thought as well as of certain doctrines of Judaism and Christianity.

His critique of other religions suggests that Heschel differs from pluralists like Hick. While he does not hold that Judaism is the only true religion and agrees with Knitter and Hick that all religious traditions produce saints, he does not see all traditions as equal. They are all valid, but they are not *equally* valid.

For Heschel, the most fundamental concept of biblical thought is that God is in search of human beings, that God is a God of pathos who needs human beings and is affected by their actions. Heschel's entire theological structure rests on the assumption that there is a personal God, a God who commands and makes demands on human beings, who is concerned and involved with human beings. Heschel has great difficulty with any system of thought that does not involve a personal concept of God.

In *God in Search of Man*, his most famous work, Heschel says the Hebrew Bible is superior to other sacred texts. Heschel states: "The Bible is mankind's greatest privilege. It is so . . . categorical in its demands and full of compassion in its understanding of the human situation. No other book so loves and respects the life of man."[18] Heschel then raises the questions, "Why does the Bible surpass everything created by man? Why is there no work worthy of comparison with it? Why is there no substitute for the Bible, no parallel to the history it has engendered? Why must all who seek the living God turn to its pages?"[19] Heschel responds to his own questions thus: "Set the Bible beside any of the truly great books produced by the genius of man, and see how they are diminished in stature. . . . Other books you can estimate, you can measure, compare; the Bible you can only extol. Its insights surpass our standards. There is nothing greater."[20] He concludes that "just as it is impossible to conceive of God without the world, so it is impossible to conceive of His concern without the Bible. . . . If God is alive, then the Bible is His voice. No other work is as worthy of being considered a manifestation of His will."[21]

Heschel's elevation of the Hebrew Bible seems to suggest that he has an inclusivist rather than a pluralist perspective. Christian inclusivists like John Paul II would agree with Heschel when he states that the aim of dialogue is to overcome "hardness of heart" and to cultivate "a sense of wonder and mystery in unlocking doors to holiness in

[18] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), 239.

[19] Ibid., 240.

[20] Ibid., 240.

[21] Ibid., 245.

time."[22] But Heschel differs radically from Christian inclusivists in his opposition to conversion and the creation of a monolithic religious society. And of course his view of the Hebrew Bible being the greatest religious book is not analogous to the Pope's view that sees Jesus as the only source of God's salvation and therefore sees interreligious dialogue as part of the Church's evangelizing mission.

Heschel's view of other faiths, including the aim of dialogue and his opposition to evangelism, is remarkably similar to the view of Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, one of the most loved and respected religious leaders in the world today, who is seen by Buddhists as a living incarnation of a Buddha. For the Dalai Lama, as for Heschel, the fact that there are different religions is something beautiful that should be celebrated. But religions are not equally valid.

The Dalai Lama believes that from a Buddhist perspective one does not attain liberation while still attached to the idea of a permanent self. There is no enduring person, a permanent self, or an immortal soul, as Jews and Christians claim. For the Dalai Lama, as for many Mahayana Buddhists, the Buddha had different teachings for different people. From this perspective, other great religious teachers and founders of religions may be seen as bodhisattvas who use skillful means to bring to the world a preliminary teaching such as the concept of a personal savior god. To the question put to him at "the Bodhgaya interviews" – "But is it only the Buddha who can be the ultimate source of refuge?" – the Dalai Lama responded:

> Liberation in which "a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality" is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksa* or *nirvana* is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practice. According to certain religions, however, salvation is a place, a beautiful paradise, like a peaceful valley. To attain such a state as this, to achieve such a state of *moksa*, does not require the practice of emptiness, the understanding of reality.[23]

This statement by the Dalai Lama is not consistent with John Hick's view of other faiths. It seems to me that both the Dalai Lama and Heschel viewed their own traditions as somehow better. Both are also deeply committed to their own paths, yet they are opposed to proselytism and make no claim that they have exclusive possession of ultimate truth. I repeat Heschel's statements: "Holiness is not the monopoly of any religion or tradition" and that "the Jews do not maintain that the way of the Torah is the only way of God."

In one of his best-known books, the Dalai Lama writes in a similar vein when he states:

> In my own case, I am convinced that Buddhism provides me with the most effective framework within which to situate my efforts to develop spiritually through cultivating love and compassion. At the same time, I must acknowledge that while Buddhism represents the best path for me – that is, it suits my character, my temperament, my inclinations, and my cultural background – the same will be true of Christianity for Christians. For them, Christianity is the best way. On the basis of my conviction, I cannot, therefore, say that Buddhism is best for everyone.[24]

[22] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," 12.

[23] The Dalai Lama, *The Bodhgaya Interviews*, ed. Jose Ignacio Calbezon (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 23.

[24] The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 225–26.

In this book the core message of the Dalai Lama is the necessity of love and compassion. This is precisely the message of Heschel, who claimed that "the greatest heresy is despair of men's power for goodness, men's power for love."[25] In the Jewish tradition we are commanded to love all human beings because all are created in the image of God. For Heschel, as for the great second century sage Rabbi Akiva, the supreme principle of the Torah is "love thy neighbor as thyself."

Heschel was very much in love with the Jewish tradition. He loved the Jewish people. But his greatness lies in his ability to extend this love to everyone and to see the humanity and touch of divinity present in various religious traditions. His love and compassion have brought great healing and great hope to all who have encountered him through the example of his life and the eloquence of his written word.

In his unique view of religious diversity, Heschel is neither a pluralist nor an inclusivist. I now see him as a Jewish interreligious artist who transcends the categories created by Christian scholars. Heschel was a committed Jew, who, on the one hand, was able to affirm and live out the consequences of the fact that no religion has a monopoly on truth or holiness, and, on the other hand, that the Hebrew Bible is "the only book in the whole world that can never be replaced."[26]

[25] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 98.

[26] *God in Search of Man*, 240.