

## ULTIMATE INTOLERANCE

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I have been teaching a course called "The Meaning of Death" for twenty years at New York University. The composition of the class does not change much from year to year: fifty bright and articulate undergraduates who are deeply interested in the subject. Religiously, the majority of the students are Jewish or Roman Catholic, complemented by a variety of other religions. When we come to the question of what each of the religions believes about the salvation of those who are not of that group, I am always taken aback. It is assumed by the non-Christian students that Christians believe that anyone who is not a Christian is damned.

This assumption is just about universal among Jewish students. I point out that, while some Christians may hold such a belief, it is not the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church. But I am presumed to have a peculiar opinion. One Jewish student this year wanted to know my sources for this strange attitude since he said he had never met a Christian who was not intent on converting him lest he go to hell. I suggested that perhaps he had not met a large percentage of the world's Christians, but his view was not much more extreme than what is usual among Jewish students.

If this view of Christianity were only a problem of college undergraduates, it would be bad enough. But I find the same view casually expressed by prominent Jewish writers. That is, they do not charge Christianity with this belief; rather, they presume it is obvious that Christians believe that Jews go to hell. A few years ago I wrote to an author in order to praise her book on the Holocaust. In the letter, I called attention to one inaccurate statement in the book. She had written: "Jews do not accept the basic tenets of Christian belief, and the Catholics must believe, if they accept their own words, that the Jews are locked out of the hereafter, and this so easily slides over into locking them out in the present." In my letter I said that if Catholics did believe that Jews are damned, it would be the most intolerant and insulting belief imaginable.

She wrote back a friendly letter but disagreed on this point: "I did not of course assume that all Catholics had ruled Jews out of the Kingdom of Heaven but it does seem likely to me that the Catholics who still believe that Jews are Christ killers will with the same literalist and fundamentalist set of mind believe that heaven is for those who have accepted the Savior. The population is not made up of abstract thinkers and philosophers." She either did not understand or did not accept the fact that I was voicing not a personal opinion but the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church.

She and I did not disagree about the fact that many Catholic Christians think that Jews are Christ-killers, from which these Christians draw terrible conclusions. But she had indeed written in the book that "the Catholics must believe, if they accept their own words" that Jews are damned. In her letter she assumed that if a Catholic who is an "abstract thinker or philosopher" thinks otherwise it can only be by ceasing to be a

genuine Catholic.

What difference does our disagreement have if we largely agree on the empirical fact of what many Catholics believe? If I am correct, then what is needed is a better education of Catholics so that they know what the Catholic church's teaching is. If she is right, the only hope for Jews is that the world's billion Catholics will disappear.

The author just cited is mainly a novelist and essayist. One might hope for a different perspective from scholars of philosophy or religion. But a similar view on the salvation of the outsider is common among Jewish writers. Herman Cohen, for example, cites Maimonides' teaching that "the righteous of the gentile nations have a portion in the world to come." This is in stark contrast with Christianity in all its forms. "In Christianity," writes Cohen, "Christ is the indispensable condition of redemption."<sup>1</sup> Milton Steinberg cites the same passage from Maimonides. And Steinberg makes the same contrast of Jewish universalism and Christian particularism: "Paul's universalism applies to professing Christians only, and of them only to those who profess correctly, that is, in harmony with Paul's ideas. All other men, no matter how truth-loving, devout, and good are irretrievably damned."<sup>2</sup>

Even more surprising is to find this contrast bluntly stated by Emil Fackenheim: "Judaism is >universalistic' for it teaches that the righteous of all nations enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christianity is >particularistic' for it bars from the Kingdom all unsaved, non-Christians, no matter how great their righteousness."<sup>3</sup>

The irony of this contrast - universal Judaism versus Christian particularism - is that it perpetuates in reverse the unfair accusation that Christians have often made against Jews. It has seemed self-evident to some Christians that the Jewish religion is for one particular group while Christianity is catholic or universal. If we are ever to achieve understanding between Christians and Jews, this claim that one's own religion is universal and the other's is particularistic must stop. What has to be realized is that Jews and Christians (and Muslims) use the same logic. Each of these religions points toward the universal by affirming their particular language of belief. While Christians, Jews and Muslims have traded charges of narrow-mindedness among themselves, these three Abrahamic religions can seem to the rest of the world remarkably similar in the intolerance of their claims.

Secular outsiders and believers in other religious traditions have plenty of evidence for intolerance by Christians, Jews and Muslims. But the beliefs of Jews, Christians and Muslims may be more complex than many people assume. As Abraham Heschel says, religions are forced to use a language "the terms of which do not pretend to describe, but to indicate; to point to rather than to capture. These terms are not always imaginative; they are often paradoxical, radical, negative."<sup>4</sup>

As the terms "scientific" and "artistic" are used today, the logic of the three religions

is closer to the artistic than to the scientific. That is, it is based upon looking for the universal by going more deeply into the particular. Its literary form is the narrative, the poem, or the play. It looks for the deeper truth in the lives of a community and the experience of persons. In contrast, what is taken to be scientific logic moves from individual cases to general statements. It deals with controlled experiments and statistical surveys. On the basis of "scientific" logic, Jewish, Christian and Muslim statements of who gets saved certainly sound arrogant.

Christianity may have a bigger problem than does Judaism of explaining this logic because of Christian missionary activity that in the past was often accompanied by political and military force. Islam, too, has a bad reputation, at least in the West, for failing to live according to its principle that there can be no compulsion in religion.<sup>5</sup> Whether Christianity or Islam has more often failed in practice is not for me to decide here. I am interested in the logic or grammar that is inherent to Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.

### A Parallel Logic

All three religions believe that there is one God, creator of all, who is good and just. Each religion also believes that this God of the universe spoke to their particular group at particular times and at particular places. The paradox here is obvious to everyone in the world who is neither Jewish, Christian nor Muslim. How can a just and benevolent God condemn people who through no fault of their own do not accept and practice the Jewish or the Christian or the Muslim religion?

The solution is found in the way each religion uses several of its key terms to refer to something very particular but also to point to a universal ideal. The major documents in each religion, using the inner language of the group, are addressed to the believers. Little is said about outsiders. The doctrines are warnings to the believers in each group not to be smug.

Religious doctrines that are addressed to people inside the group risk sounding either unintelligible or offensive to anyone outside the group. Each of the three religions has a new task in the modern world because intramural doctrines are now readily accessible outside the group. When the Vatican makes a statement about Judaism, Jewish leaders are more likely to pay attention to it than most ordinary Catholics. But unless one devotes a lot of time to understanding the history of Vatican documents, the statements may be unintelligible - or worse, offensive-sounding.

The problem is not peculiar to Vatican documents; the problem is inherent to religious statements. In the case of a religion, writes George Lindbeck, "one must have some skill in *how* to use its language and practice its way of life before the propositional meaning of its affirmations become determinate enough to be rejected."<sup>6</sup> A religion cannot abandon the only logic it has. Nonetheless, each of the three

religions has a major educational task in trying to improve its intelligibility. That does not mean converting people to the religion. It means changing some formulas that may have once made sense but no longer do; more often, it is trying to explain the context and the limits of statements that sound intolerant of other religions.

In Christianity the key terms that are particular but point to the universal are Christ, church, and baptism. From its earliest centuries, Christianity has maintained that "Christ is the one savior," that "outside the church there is no salvation," and that one needs to be baptized in order to be saved. Salvation appears to be limited to the Christian.

From the earliest centuries, however, Christian thinkers have wrestled with the question of the salvation of the non-Christian. Augustine developed a place called Limbo for the unbaptized; God would not damn those who died without baptism.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas asks what happens to the unbeliever in Africa who has never heard the gospel preached? Aquinas' s answer is that perhaps God sends an angel to deliver the gospel to such a person. The solutions were clumsy but at least they were tried. The official doctrine makers did not directly address the question; they concentrated on practical guides for Christians rather than speculative questions about non-Christians.

The logic of Christianity can be seen in the double meanings of Christ, church and baptism. The term "Christ" has always been a title attributed to Jesus of Nazareth. But in the later Pauline literature, in the fourth Gospel, and in the philosophical thrusts of Justin Martyr or Clement of Alexandria, "Christ" is the name of a universal ideal. Thus, in Christian terms the path of all righteous men and women leads to "Christ" whether they have ever heard of Jesus, Pope or sacraments. In Christian terms one must be a follower of Christ to attain salvation.

The continuation of this logic is found in the outrageous-sounding doctrine that outside the church there is no salvation. The doctrine has been especially insisted upon in the Roman Catholic church. To people outside this institution, the meaning of the doctrine seems obvious. Yet Pope Pius XII excommunicated Leonard Feeney, a priest in Boston who wanted to be more Catholic than the Pope. Feeney took the doctrine literalistically; insisting on the need to be within the church, he ironically found himself outside the church.

"Church" has a different meaning for Protestants and Catholics. The typical Protestant usage is to refer to the local congregation. Catholics usually mean the world wide institution. In both cases, however, "church" refers to the assembly of Christian believers. But church can also be used as a pointer to the gathering of the elect, a meaning that was quite common until the twelfth century. In this meaning, there is no salvation outside the church - by definition. Even if one is Jew, Muslim, Buddhist or atheist, one is saved because of the church.

Karl Rahner's phrase "anonymous Christian" has often been attacked, sometimes ridiculed. But it is simply an attempt to state in Christian language that salvation is not restricted to card carrying members of the Christian church. In Rahner's words, "it is a profound admission of the fact that God is greater than man and the church."<sup>8</sup> The phrase, anonymous Christian, would be better understood as "anonymous follower of the path that Christians see summed up by the term Christ" rather than "anonymous member of the institution called the Christian church."

Paul did not say that Jews would come into the church or accept Jesus as the Christ. Paul never denies the validity of the Torah path for those Jews who cannot accept Jesus as messiah. Paul's main problem was not "how do I find a gracious God" but "how can Jew and Christian live in one community."<sup>9</sup> Salvation was from the Jews, according to Paul, while the Christians were to be grafted into the tree of salvation.

With the term "baptism" there was a more contrived distinction. In addition to baptism of water there was baptism of desire. The "good pagan" was said to receive baptism of desire if he or she were seeking God with a pure heart. The same path of salvation was possible for the baptized (by water) and for people who had never heard of baptism

The Catholic church's teaching is stated at Vatican II: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - these too may attain salvation."<sup>10</sup>

The language is (Catholic) Christian but the language points beyond the church. The emphasis is admittedly more positive than was the teaching in the past, but it is not the invention of a new doctrine. Recently, the Catholic church, together with Reform and Conservative Judaism, published a declaration that states: "While the Catholic church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of salvation for all, it also acknowledges that Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God."<sup>11</sup> There is no explanation given for what to many people might seem incompatible claims.

The Christian who says to the non-Christian "you are saved because you are unknowingly a follower of Christ" may be offering the highest compliment that the Christian can offer. However, Christians have to realize that what is offered as compliment may be received as insult. This is especially the case in Christian-Jewish relations because of past conflicts. A Buddhist might not be offended by being told he is Christ-like, just as the Buddhist may offer the Christian the compliment of having a true Buddha-nature. But Christians had better refrain from complementing a Jew as a follower of Christ - at least for another millennium or two.

I have acknowledged that Christianity's historical aggressiveness presents a more obvious problem than the one that Jewish religion has. Nonetheless, the logic of

Judaism is similar. Three key terms that Jewish religion uses to link particular and universal are "chosen," "Torah" and "covenant." Each term is an obviously particular word with specific historical references. Nevertheless, each term also points - in a Jewish way of speaking - to an all-embracing universality.

The Jewish claim to be "the chosen people" sounds outrageously arrogant to many Gentiles. Some modern Jewish writers try to soften the claim or avoid the claim to be the chosen, but it is undeniably what the central Jewish claim is.<sup>12</sup> God chose "his people." The prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, says: "We must praise the Lord of all, the Maker of heaven and earth, who has set us apart from the other families of earth, giving us a destiny unique among the nations."<sup>13</sup>

If chosenness were an achievement and a possession of the Jewish people, it would be a claim to moral superiority. But chosenness is a burden, the place where responsibility lies. In the Bible the burden usually lies upon Israel but can suddenly shift. "Blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my heritage." (Isa. 19:25). When the Egyptian soldiers who were chasing the Israelites drowned in the Red Sea, the angels in heaven began to sing. God stopped them and said: "My children lie drowned in the sea and you would sing"?<sup>14</sup>

This occasional reversal is a reminder to the Jewish people that the real chosen people are people; that Israel is a stand-in for the vulnerable creature that God placed in the middle of the garden. Jewish thought at its best has always recognized this vocation: "The election of Israel constitutes in no sense an exception; it is rather the symbolic confirmation of the love of God for the whole race of man."<sup>15</sup>

"When Torah came into the world, freedom came into the world." Torah is a term that starts out as the instruction of a parent to a child. It becomes the name for God's revelation to Moses and thereby the center of Jewish life. Although Torah is a term unknown to most non-Jews, the Talmud premises the salvation of the Gentile on the fact that he or she "engages in Torah."<sup>16</sup> How can someone engage in Torah who either has never heard of it or who wishes no part in Jewish life?

"Torah" is structurally parallel to "Christ" in Christianity. It is a Jewish way of affirming the universal in the particular. The Torah, which was offered to all other nations before Israel, is meant for all peoples.<sup>17</sup> The righteous of all nations who are following their best lights are - in Jewish language - following the way of Torah.

A similar connection is made with the word covenant. It starts as a secular word but it is taken over to refer to God's relation to his chosen few at Sinai. Over time "covenant" comes to have a more universal meaning. In Jewish terms God made a covenant with all peoples through Noah. According to the Talmud, salvation for the Gentiles depends on following the prescriptions of the covenant with Noah. For the Jew this belief refers to a broadly inclusive covenant but to a non-Jew this language seems very limiting. How can Gentiles follow out the commands to Noah

if they have never read the Bible and do not accept Jewish doctrines?

Once more the covenant with Noah provides a Jewish way of affirming the universal in the particular. All of the children of Adam and the descendants of Noah are part of the covenant relation. Christians, of course, assert their inclusion in a new or renewed covenant. The Qur'an does not speak much about a covenant but does affirm a covenant as the metahistorical foundation of the relation of God and humanity (7:172). From a Jewish perspective, those non-Jews who avoid murder, idolatry, incest (the three absolute commands) are living according to the covenant.<sup>18</sup>

When a rabbi friend refers to me as "an amateur Jew," I take the phrase as it was intended, namely, as a compliment. To someone who did not appreciate the logic, such language could be offensive.

Islam has the same problem as do Christianity and Judaism in the way that its logic or grammar sounds intolerant. It speaks of "Islam", "Muslim" and "Qur'an" in ways that limit salvation to those believers. The Qur'an seems to praise Muslims to the exclusion of everyone else. "You are the best people that has been brought forth for mankind."

The Qur'an is parallel not to the Bible but to Jesus as the Christ; it is the "word of God." The Qur'an was given to Muhammed at particular times and places. It has been cherished by Muslims ever since. The Qur'an is also said to be not a book but (as the name indicates) a recitation from a book which exists nowhere but in heaven, it is a text for all peoples. The Qur'an itself says that every nation has its own messenger (10:47). Thus, the Qur'an - in a Muslim way of speaking - is the affirming of a universal revelation.

Similarly, Islam is not only the name of a religious institution founded in the seventh century C.E. It is an attitude that every person must have toward God in order to be saved. Outside of Islam - submission to God - there is no salvation. "There is only one doctrine of unity which every religion has asserted and Islam came only to reaffirm what has always existed and thus to return to the primordial religion."<sup>19</sup>

"Every child is born a Muslim" is a Muslim belief that may sound outrageous. It merely indicates the universal meaning of the term Muslim. The strictures about being a true Muslim are meant for those who have professed to be Muslim. In the language of Islam, only a "true Muslim" can be saved. "Whoever believes in Allah and the last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord."(2:62)

Similar to saying that someone is a true Christian or a true Jew, calling someone a true Muslim refers to all those who live by their birthright as Muslim and follow the path to the one God of all. Some of those who call themselves Muslim turn out to be false Muslims. Some of the "true Muslims" turn out to be Christian, Jewish or Buddhist.

When I have been called a true Muslim I am grateful for the compliment.

Why do these three religions use a logic and grammar so easily misunderstood? Why don't they just say "anyone who is good goes to heaven"? I think it is because that kind of generalization does not help anyone and it would undermine the power of religious doctrine. It would simply obscure the fact that people live particular lives and speak different languages. For any religion to try to speak directly about the salvation of everyone would dissolve the religion into philosophical ethics. But what each of the religions finds difficult to grasp is that their particular way of pointing to the universal does not create a universal language. The fact that I intend to include the other is not necessarily experienced as a compliment by the other; no one wants to be part of someone else's system.

Religion lives on the passionate commitment to particular events, persons, beliefs, causes. If the three Abrahamic religions were to disappear, religious passions would find expression elsewhere. Movements that can generate passionate commitment will always pose some danger.

I do not think one can say that either Jews, Christians or Muslims have done a very good job educating their own people or explaining themselves to outsiders. Still, I would prefer to struggle for improvement with these profoundly human traditions rather than turn over religious passion to the -isms that have tried to replace traditional religion. Fascism, communism and nazism have probably been the worst -isms but every movement that has a name ending with -ism threatens to coerce the rest of us with its ideology while not having the play of ritual, humor and paradox that have been the salvation of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.

Jews, Christians and Muslims have been divided in the modern world, each trying to defend its own "revelation." But if there is only one God, one creation, one revelation, one redemption, then there is urgent need for a conversation that would open a better way of affirming one's own religion without insulting the other two. It is difficult enough to learn one's own religious tradition so that trying to master three is an impossibility. But we need a religious education which is aware when using terms such as chosen, covenant, grace, faith, revelation, redemption, that there are two other religions that have a legitimate share in the term. At the least, there must be an unambiguous affirmation of salvation beyond one's own religion even if theology cannot explain how.

In the Christian New Testament, the clearest standard of judgment for one's life is found in Matthew 25:31-46. The judge will say: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me...." No test of denominational membership or orthodox doctrine is put forth. Who turns out to be "God's people," we have been warned, will be a surprise.



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  5. Qur' an 2:256.
  6. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 68.
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  10. Lumen Gentium, sec. 16.
  11. AReflections on Covenant and Mission,@ *Newsday*, August 14, 2002, A17.
  12. Franz Rosenzweig, *Judaism Despite Christianity* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1969), 131, for the necessary place of chosenness; Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 105, for a denial of the term in favor of "distinctness."
  13. *Gates of Prayer* (New York, 1975), 615.
  14. C. G. Montifiore and H.Loewe, *The Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 52.
  15. Herman Cohen in Raphael Loewe, *op. cit.*, 63.
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19. S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972)