TOLERANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism



SANDRA B. LUBARSKY

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This book is dedicated to my husband,
Marcus Peter Ford

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Acknowledgments

This book began as an inquiry into the meaning of chosenness in a pluralistic world. Very soon into that project, the issue of competing truth claims became central, and I was led into the larger world of comparative religions and from there into interreligious dialogue. In this pluralistic society, it seems not only pretentious but also anachronistic to try to make sense of (or to declare as nonsense) the idea of chosenness without reference to the self-understandings of other traditions. It has become clear to me that dialogue between traditions is fundamental to doing theology.

I am particularly indebted to two individuals for their guidance and encouragement on this project. Professor John B. Cobb, Jr., both before and since serving as my dissertation advisor, has been my "master teacher." It has been my great good luck to study with him; his book, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, has been my model for this study.

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Marcus Peter Ford. Many times our mutual students have wondered what our dinner conversations are like: over the past five years they very often have been about this manuscript. Marcus'

unwavering support, his critical remarks and leading insights, have been crucial to this project. Together we hope that our two young sons, Aaron and Daniel, will have the temperaments and the desire to talk with others (including their parents) about the things that matter most.

Introduction

In the last twenty-five years, the effort to understand the ways of others has reinvigorated religious discussion on many levels. We have entered what one leading Jewish thinker has described as the "Age of Dialogue."[1] But what should be the nature of such dialogue? And what should be its goal? What exactly is the proper relationship between different communities of faith?

In December of 1987, these questions were addressed on the opinion pages of the *New York Times* by Arthur Hertzberg, an officer of the World Jewish Congress, in reply to a statement made by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the chief Vatican theologian. As interpreted by Hertzberg, Cardinal Ratzinger's position is that "a Jew encounters the full truth of his Judaism only by becoming a Catholic."[2] Protesting this assertion, Jewish participants in the formal Catholic-Jewish dialogue that began in 1971 between the two communities canceled their scheduled meetings, arguing that such a position makes dialogue impossible. But Hertzberg argued that Cardinal Ratzinger did nothing offensive; instead, he "cured us of an illusion" and rightly redirected the path of dialogue. According to Hertzberg, Cardinal Ratzinger claimed for Catholicism what most Jews wish to claim for Judaism: "religious primacy." While such a claim does put an end to the development of "a new, liberal theology" which can be professed by both Jews and Catholics, it does not put an end to interreligious dialogue.

> It is thus clear now beyond any doubt that no dialogue that has any theological content can be conducted between the two communities, for such discussions can lead only to increasing anger. But the dialogue is not therefore at an end. . . . The fallout from Cardinal Ratzinger's interview has simply re-established that Jews and Catholics belong to differing religions. The dialogue can now return to its origins, no doubt in a much more sober mood. Jews should continue to discuss with Catholics a whole host of *social and even political problems* in which both communities are involved. . . . Jews and Catholics are comrades in the quest for social justice.[3]

Hertzberg clearly restates the modern approach to the relationship between faiths: people of different traditions who find themselves in close proximity and dependent upon the same resources, and perhaps having a common

enemy, must tolerate one another's differences and even cooperate with one another. But they need not, and ought not, go beyond tolerance to a relationship that is not simply "external," concerned with social or political or economic relations, to a relationship that is "internal," concerned with one's deepest convictions about the nature of reality. On the model of the polite visitor who refrains from speaking about religion or politics to his or her hosts, the dialogue between different religions should also shun any critical discussion of the things that matter most: our perceptions of truth.

This book is written from a position that is at odds with the notion that we should engage in dialogue only in order to assure social tranquility and not also as a means for uncovering truth. It should be undertaken for both reasons. Dialogue that joins diverse people together for work on a shared good may lead us into fellowship. Dialogue that extends our understanding of one another, of ourselves, and of truth, may ground that fellowship in deep soil so that its sweet fruit might endure. Indeed, "practical" dialogue—about social problems—and "theological" dialogue—about perceived truths—go hand-in-hand. Theological dialogue is not only possible; it is highly desirable because it is a means for acquiring a fuller understanding and hence a deeper peace.

This book is an attempt to describe a Jewish approach to non-Jewish traditions. Beyond this, it is an attempt to describe a way in which Jews might remain faithful to their relationship with God even as they encounter other traditions. It is based on the assumption that the plurality of faiths is a blessed fact and that the strongest affirmation of this fact—an affirmation of the theological relevance of other religions—is also the more profound way of remaining faithful as Jews to God's presence in our lives.

It begins with an affirmation of *veridical pluralism* and a rejection of both absolutism and relativism.[4] Veridical pluralism is the position that there is a plurality of truth-laden traditions. The truths that are possessed by different traditions, both religious and nonreligious, may be different—that is, they may be illuminative of different aspects of reality, or they may be the same truths expressed differently. Truth itself is coherent—it holds together without contradiction; the partial truths that are known to us through our limited perspectives may thus be different from each other, but not mutually contradictory. There is a universe and it contains a plurality of true expressions. It also contains many incorrect descriptions. Our task, as members of the universe and of particular truth-seeking traditions, is to distinguish between the true and the false and *to make the truth our inheritance, regardless of its progenitors.*

It is in dialogue that we who participate in various traditions which claim knowledge of the truth are challenged to correct, enlarge, restate and/or reform our knowledge. When it is undertaken for the sake of the universe—that is, for the sake of everyone, including ourselves and others, the nonhuman world and God—it entails the mutual setting forward of our most private and crucial beliefs for the purpose of reaping a fuller understanding of

truth. Such dialogue is termed in this essay *transformative dialogue* because serious regard for another's truth claims may well lead to a transformation of one's own self-understanding.[5]

In brief, veridical pluralism assumes both a profound commitment to truth and a wholehearted commitment to a tradition. At the same time, it presupposes the historical conditionality of all traditions and yet stipulates that the hypothesis that they are equally valuable be tested in dialogue. Finally, it requires full openness to the claims of others and the willingness to transform one's own tradition in light of the truth that is found.

Indeed, this book constitutes a methodological prelude to transformative dialogue between Jews and non-Jews or between Judaism and nonreligious outlooks such as Marxism and evolutionary biology. In chapter one, a fuller argument for veridical pluralism is made and transformative dialogue is further explained. Chapter two is a brief overview of the history of the Jewish understanding of non-Jewish traditions. The models that four major modern Jewish thinkers—Leo Baeck, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Mordecai Kaplan—developed for understanding non-Jewish traditions have been formative for contemporary liberal Jewish thought. In chapters three through six, these models are examined in detail, both to illuminate our options and to move us beyond their creators' insights. The final chapter is an imaginative construction of a transformative dialogue, undertaken to show the benefits of such an exchange. While not the result of an actual interchange between a Jew and a Buddhist, it is to be read as an example of some of the possibilities inherent in transformative dialogue.

The point of departure here is the affirmation of veridical pluralism, which requires a new way of approaching other traditions. It is argued that mutually transformative dialogue is the most fruitful way to respond to the fact of veridical pluralism and should therefore be the goal of Jewish participants in dialogue.

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Veridical Pluralism and Transformative Dialogue

Because Jews have almost always lived as a minority community whose religio-cultural orientation differed, sometimes more and sometimes less, from that of the majority community, they have been ready advocates of religious tolerance. This advocacy was not a recognition of the truth claims of other religious traditions. Indeed, traditional Judaism seldom (if ever) maintained that other religions were in themselves pathways to salvation. Rather, the Jewish affirmation of religious tolerance was primarily a response to the sociological conditions of the Jewish people. Were Christians and Muslims to establish a policy of religious tolerance, life for the Jewish population within their borders would be a good deal less fragile. Indeed, since religious tolerance is the basis for civic tolerance, the political, social, and economic benefits of religious tolerance would be considerable.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was a significant increase in the level of tolerance that was accorded the Jews who lived in Western Europe. But the basis of Jewish emancipation was not the Christian community's acknowledgment of the truth value of Judaism. What was affirmed was that *despite* Judaism, Jews ought to be accorded some liberties. A position of tolerance was reached on the basis of a general humanitarianism: all human beings, by virtue of their humanity, deserve a certain amount of respect. Important as this insight was, it required no reconstruction of Christianity's understanding of Judaism. Jews, not Judaism, were to be tolerated.

In the main, the emancipated Jewish community did not move beyond this general humanitarian principle. Judaism's own, much older, theory of the natural rights of human beings continued to serve as the framework for assessing the non-Jew. The tradition of the Noachide Laws asserts that salvation is available to non-Jews if they maintain a minimal level of humanity. People of other traditions are to be tolerated—indeed, will be saved—if they adhere to the Noachide Laws. The only "truths" that other religious traditions possess are the "truths" of Judaism, most especially those that are stated in the Noachide Laws.