

Religious Plurality – Danger or Possibility | april 2009

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Although I frequently participate in Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues in Israel, and many Muslims are in fact involved in the activities of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, I must point out that my expertise and experience is in the area of the bilateral relations of Jews and Christians in the past and in the present, both in western lands where Jews have lived for centuries as a minority in the midst of Christian majorities and most especially in the unique setting of the contemporary State of Israel where the minority-majority roles are reversed. I hope that my observations and insights from the special field of Jewish-Christian relations will nonetheless have relevance for the broader topic of religious plurality in general.

Religious plurality is neither a danger nor a possibility but simply a universal empirical fact of human existence. The question, then, is how each particular faith community views and relates to this increasingly apparent universal reality, whether as something unacceptable that must be overcome through the victory of the one over the many, or as something unavoidable that is merely tolerated, or as something positive and promising that should be creatively and constructively cultivated through dialogue between the faiths.

One's approach to religious plurality, it seems to me, will be determined in large measure by one's understanding of universality and particularity. Throughout most of western intellectual history, the two concepts have generally been understood as a dichotomy. The universal-particular dichotomy in western thought was subscribed to and strengthened by the classical self-understanding of Christians according to which Christianity is the one and only universal religion to which all humanity must ultimately convert (Hegel's "absolute religion") and according to which the Church Universal (Corpus Chisti) is the one and only legitimate world community.

Throughout most of western Christian history the two dominant groups that chose to maintain their particularity and to remain outside the Church Universal were the Jewish people and the Islamic umma, the former in part living precariously within the borders of the Christian west and the latter living on the borders of the Christian west. In the eyes of the Christian west, the Eastern Christian communities have occupied an ambiguous place that was neither fully inside nor fully outside the Christian west. Until relatively recent times, the Christian west waged an unrelenting crusade, whether through missionary efforts or through crass coercion and force of arms, in its attempt to either decimate these particular groups or to dominate them and impose its particular truth and specific world community on them.

The Age of Enlightenment, secularism and modernity did little to alter the basic western dichotomy of universality and particularity. In the Modern Era, the dichotomy was recycled and hardened into a full-fledged opposition in which universality and particularity are viewed as contradictory and mutually exclusive frames of mind and ideological pursuits. The normative standards of what is best and what is true culture laid down by enlightened rational and scientific White European males were deemed to be universally applicable to any and every socio-historical context. Affirming the universal oneness of all humanity and aiming to achieve universal equality, these standards were contrived to suppress all differences and otherness.

By failing to recognize that it was rooted in a Euro-centric and political context, the particular universal program of the Enlightenment in its implementation set in motion the destructive mechanisms of cultural and political dominance which marginalized many groups – among them women, Blacks and Orientals – and placed them on the periphery of power. Equality, the benevolent gift of enlightened universal dominance, in practice was offered only to those who were willing to hide their particular cultures and adopt universal western norms and values.

Enlightened western universalism provided the justification for the colonization of many “primitive” peoples and “uncivilized” lands. Ultimately, the excessive oneness of the rational and scientific modern-day Tower of Babel, buttressed by the traditional Christian concept and construction of universalism, produced the attempt to totally annihilate one particular people and culture – namely the Jewish people and its culture. As the historian Franklin Littell observed, the basic problem of the Deutsche Christen during the Nazi era, and the basis of their hatred of Jews and Judaism, were their inability to grasp the peculiar dialectic of particularity and universality through which God works in human history.

The late Bishop of Stockholm and eminent scholar Krister Stendahl, in a lecture entitled “From God’s Perspective We Are All Minorities,” delivered in 1992 at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard, boldly declared that “universalism is the ultimate arrogance in the realm of religion,” going on to note that “it is, by definition, unavoidably spiritual colonialism, spiritual imperialism.” As a footnote, I might add that in the same lecture, he observes that Eastern Christianity, perhaps in part due to its centuries-long experience as a minority, has always known better than the West that the nature of confessional language is not to contrast the Christian with the non-Christian, but rather is it essentially doxological, that is, a way of praising God out of the fullness of one’s heart, or what Stendahl calls “singing my song to Jesus with abandon without telling negative stories about others.”

Judaism has generally emphatically rejected the presentation of particularity and universality as a mutually exclusive dichotomy and rather has viewed the twin concepts as complementary. Particularity is affirmed as a universal empirical fact, and universalism is regarded as a value and as the particular goal of Israel’s singular monotheism. Judaism not only recognizes particularity as an undeniable principle of human existence, but also confers on it a spiritual dimension by conceiving of it as divinely decreed. Particularity implies diversity and therefore plurality and Judaism affirms diversity and plurality also in the realm of the

spirit. Only in the “latter days” will the historical-existential tension of the dilemma of particularity and universality finally be allayed when the divinely established unity in diversity at the time of creation will be restored, not through the abolition of the divinely decreed particularities but through their reconstituted composite unitedness.

In the course of the historical-existential tension between particularity and universality, the interpretation of the two concepts and of the relative role which they are assigned in the overall framework of Jewish thought, to a large degree has been directly dependent on specific historical situations. The stress laid upon one or the other of the thrusts by successive generations of Jewish thinkers often has been the direct result of external political-religious conditions to which Jews reacted in their formulations of the concepts of particularism and universalism. Each new formulation in turn determined to a great extent the Jewish attitude towards the surrounding world.

In the socio-political context of the modern age, many Jews have sought release and relief from the historical-existential tension of particularity and universality, either through flight into the excessive and narcissistic oneness of the particular western brand of mono-logic and mono-cultural universalism, or through withdrawal into an excessive and arrogant particularism which is largely divorced from any universal vision or goal. The age-old universal-particular debate which for centuries was conducted between Jews and the western Christian world, but much less so between Jews and the Muslim world, in the course of the modern age has again been recycled and internalized as a raging debate within the Jewish people.

The establishment of a Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel did not and cannot automatically guarantee a return to an honest and creative wrestling with the profound dilemmas inherent in the historical-existential tension of particularity and universality. Thus, the particularism-universalism debate within the Jewish world should not be perceived as a debate between Israeli or Zionist Jewry and Diaspora Jewry, even though at times it might appear to be. Many of the founding fathers of Zionism effectively internalized the very same western paradigms which had marginalized and even demonized the Jewish people and used them to construct an Israeli identity that in many respects involved the marginalization of certain groups within Israeli-Jewish society, such as both “Oriental” and Orthodox Jews. Ultimately, of course, most Israeli Jews – Sephardi and Ashkenazi, secular and orthodox – have constructed their sense of self in contrast to our most significant and ever-present “other” – the Arabs or Palestinians.

It is not only the ultra-Orthodox in both Israeli and Diaspora Jewish society who have withdrawn deeper and deeper into excessive particularism designed to separate them both from the non-Jewish world and from large segments of the modern Jewish world. There are also those in our midst who view Jewish nationalism and Jewish sovereignty over the whole land of Israel as closely related to, if not identical with, the messianic consummation of history, and who thus feel they have a divine mission that justifies the use of any means to impose their particular exclusive messianism on Jews and Arabs alike.

The intention of the above observations is in no way to contrast Judaism, Christianity and

Islam with regard to the topic of religious plurality, and the related issue of our respective understandings of universality and particularity. More specifically, I do not agree with those who speak of a clash of civilizations between the Muslim world and western Christian society and certainly not with the extremists who portray the other as devoid of moral character and without religious legitimacy, some of whom regrettably depict Israel and Jews as a hostile “bridgehead” into the Arab world in particular and the Muslim world in general.

Rather, I agree with my colleague and global interfaith activist, Rabbi David Rosen, that what we are witnessing today is not a clash of civilizations or faiths, but a clash within the different civilizations and faiths:

“It is a clash between those elements of a religious culture whose sense of historic injury and humiliation leads to alienation and conflict within their own societies as well as to those outside their religious culture; and those who seek to constructively engage other societies as part of world culture and a positive interaction with modernity.

This “clash within civilizations” means that while religious extremists of various traditions and cultures are (almost always unwittingly) part and parcel of a “conspiracy of conflict,” the enlightened voices of religion within these traditions have a responsibility to work together not only to be greater than the sum of their different parts but also to provide the essential alternative testimony – i.e. that of interreligious cooperation and mutual respect....”

In order to advance towards such interreligious cooperation and mutual respect I believe we must liberate ourselves from enslavement to the dichotomies which have divided us and channel our newly released energies into a collaborative effort to creatively face in dialogue the shared dilemmas which unite us. In this collaborative venture we should focus on a number of urgent needs:

We need of a new appreciation of the dialectic of universality and particularity; we especially need to recognize that universalism and particularism are complementary and that one without the other can be literally lethal.

We need a new understanding of differences; we especially need to recognize that “different” should never be the object of a value judgement.

We need a new perception of “otherness”; we especially need to be attentive to the ways in which we use language in the construction of our particular identities, and most especially in our portrayal of the “other.”

We need a greater consciousness that each of us is by nature an “other”; we especially need to realize that each is by nature “different.”

We need a new understanding of the nature and dynamics of true dialogue; we especially need to appreciate the ways in which dialogue allows us to cross borders inside and outside us.

We need a new approach to multiculturalism; we especially need to create the necessary space in which different cultures and faiths can freely interact in a way that does not require anyone to give up particularities as a precondition for encounter.

Finally, as men and women of faith – Jews, Christians and Muslims, like our common father Abraham who even in the pain-filled days immediately after his circumcision sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day waiting to welcome guests, we need to make clear to one another that our particular covenants with God do not mean a withdrawal from the open spaces of humanity into the seclusion of our respective tents. ///