

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Where Should the Focus Be?

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The most pressing issue is not whether Israel will officially recognize non-Orthodox Judaism but whether the American Jewish community will commit itself to the principles of religious pluralism—seeking dialogue among traditions with the aim of mutual self-understanding. Such pluralism will not only enliven our religious culture but is also an important educational goal.

Nothing brings out pluralist sentiments within the American Jewish community like a right-wing government in Israel. I count myself firmly among the advocates for religious pluralism. But two questions have recently arisen that form the basis for this article: (1) What do people mean when they say they are in favor or “religious pluralism?,” and (2) What are the implications of advocating for religious pluralism for how we teach Judaism and think about the development of Jewish identity?

The answer to the first question seems simple. To be “for pluralism” means to favor the full recognition of other legitimate branches of Judaism than Orthodoxy within the Israeli system. For example, any Israeli citizen should be free to choose whichever rabbi he or she favors to perform key life-cycle rituals, such as conversion, marriage, and burial. All these choices should be recognized as legitimate by Israeli law. “Pluralism” refers to the legitimizing of multiple religious options.

But this simple answer leaves much unanswered. How many multiple religious options should be recognized? Although the conventional answer is—the other recognized religious denominations—one can see how that might seem quite arbitrary. What about the secular Israeli Jews who recognize no rabbinic authority as legitimate and favor an Israeli version of the “separation of church and state” that allows one to also choose non-religious options for marking life-cycle events? Is their cause included under the banner of

religious pluralism?

Without trying to untangle the knots of the struggle in Israel, I suggest there is much confusion about what American Jews mean when they say they favor religious pluralism. Our loose thinking on the subject opens us to the charge that the cause of religious pluralism is little more than the self-interest of American non-Orthodox Jews writ large: a positive-sounding label used to defend our movements, our rabbis, our conversions in a power struggle with the Israeli rabbinate. While defending legitimate interests is the norm of political life, I believe that quite apart from our self-interest there is a principle of religious pluralism worth defending. But that principle is almost never articulated in these political debates, perhaps because it is both complex and controversial. In this article, I attempt one possible articulation and spell out its implications for Jewish education and identity development.

The most clarifying writing on religious pluralism that I have found comes from a group of American liberal Protestant thinkers who are dealing with a seemingly different question—the encounter of Christians with people of faith from different religious traditions. They are asking whether a Christian in good faith can acknowledge the religious validity of other faith communities, even if these communities do not recognize the centrality of Christ to their religious lives (Hick, 1987). I cite here the work of one such thinker, Professor Diana Eck (1993), to illustrate the principles of religious pluralism.

Eck begins by distinguishing "pluralism" from a related term, "diversity." She understands diversity to be a value-neutral recognition that today we encounter religious differences with increasing frequency. In America we can no longer divide the religious scene into three neat divisions of "Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish" because many other religious communities operate in our society. In Israel this means not only that Jews, Moslems, and Christians cross one another's paths with greater frequency in such a city as Jerusalem but also that the Jewish population can no longer meaningfully be divided into the two camps of religious and secular. For these camps themselves subdivide into a multiple of communities that do not necessarily share much in common.

Eck posits that the recognition of religious diversity poses a serious problem for religious people who need to define a relationship to those "others." As long as communities lived in cultural isolation from one another, it was enough to be tolerant and essentially ignore one another. But once the members of these communities start to interact on a regular basis, it becomes more difficult to ignore one another. Or in Israel, once the non-Orthodox movements began to make their presences felt and attract Israelis to their institutions, they become a factor to be *dealt* with.

There are three characteristic contemporary responses to religious diversity that cut across religious lines. Each response deals with the recognition of diversity from a different value stance. Eck calls these responses, "exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist."

An exclusivist "affirms identity in a complex world of plurality by a return to the firm foundations of his/her own tradition and an emphasis on the distinctive identity provided by that tradition" (1993, p. 174). Often that distinctive identity is reinforced by clearly defining "who I am not" and distancing oneself from those others. Exclusivists tend to believe they have the one and only authentic tradition and an exclusive relationship to God. Other people may be good or righteous in their own terms, but they do not have access to God's truth as revealed exclusively

to this community of faith. At times exclusivists feel the need to defend their truth from the incursion of others who are making false claims in the name of God and tradition.

An inclusivist recognizes with greater affirmation the presence of other religious traditions and the sincerity of their paths toward God. An inclusivist may seek dialogue with and cooperation between religious communities and believe that the one God may be approached in different ways. However, an inclusivist also believes that his or her tradition holds the ultimate key to truth and that the truths of other traditions are but reflections of this community's revelation and special relationship to God. There are many paths to God, and each has its own truth value; but one path is the surer way, the epitome of all the other paths. Yet, still inclusivists often seek reconciliation with other traditions.

A pluralist differs from an inclusivist in dropping the insistence that there is one path that is surer than the others. A pluralist may be fully committed to his or her own tradition, but not because it is the one true path for all, but the one true path for me and my community. Others may have that same existential commitment to their traditions, and the question to explore together is not, "Who has the ultimate truth?" but "What can we learn from one another?" For without any community's compromising its own faith commitments, there are areas in which each tradition can learn from the other.

Eck stresses the difference between pluralism and relativism. A relativist sees—as does a pluralist—"the many ways our cognitive and moral understandings are relative to our historical, cultural, and ideological contexts" (1993, p. 194). Yet, the relativist concludes from this observation that no one tradition can possess the truth and therefore all of them are false. In contrast, the pluralist concludes that no one tradition can possess *all* the truth, and therefore, their adherents would be wise to learn from one another. Pluralists value diversity as a blessing and seek dialogue among traditions. The aim of dialogue is neither syncretism nor universalism, but rather mutual self-understanding. Through dia-

logue, each side will better understand who they are and what is unique about their tradition by better understanding who the others are and what is unique about their relationships with God.

In Eck's view religious pluralism is far more than a position in a political debate; it is a philosophic approach to questions of religious difference. This approach has great relevance for the relationships that Jews develop with members of other religions. However, for this article I explore its implications for the relationships that Jews develop with one another around questions of religious difference.

It is commonly assumed in the communal debate that the Orthodox movements take an exclusivist position while the non-Orthodox movements take a pluralist position. Yet Eck's analysis questions that assumption. Are there not Orthodox thinkers who are more accurately described as inclusivists? And are the non-Orthodox movements actually seeking pluralistic dialogue or accommodations based on an inclusivist stance? Do they want anything more than to be included as other legitimate branches within Judaism?

Indeed, as Eck would probably admit, religious pluralism is a rare and risky stance to assume. It requires that one open oneself to the possibility that the religious positions that you have developed may be radically incomplete and that you may have much to learn from others who approach religion in ways quite different from you. It requires great self-confidence and faith that religious truth is an open-ended process of discovery. Most Jews of all denominations seem to prefer to stay within the comfortable boundaries of the familiar and not risk the openness of dialogue. For dialogue can lead to personal challenge and change.

But there is a price to be paid for staying with the familiar. Youth who grow up within one movement have few opportunities to get to know—let alone dialogue with—youth from other movements. Each movement develops its own religious culture that is quite foreign to outsiders. And far from enjoying the intensity of religious debate, our American Jewish community could be character-

ized as largely religiously indifferent. People stay with the familiar less from conviction than from convenience and habit. How often does one meet young American Jews who are ready to enthusiastically defend the principles of their religious movement? Rarely enough, especially outside of Orthodox circles.

The pragmatic argument for pluralism in the American Jewish community is to enliven our religious culture. I admit there already are many debates within each movement about matters that primarily concern the clergy. But it is rare to encounter genuine dialogue across denominational lines in which the most pressing of religious questions are discussed in ways that help clarify why people of faith take the different positions that they do. In fact what has deeply concerned me in listening to Reform and Conservative Jews speak about the current controversy in Israel is that the political has drowned out the religious. People see the Orthodox rabbinate as defending only their political powers. The whole range of serious religious questions involved in deciding "Who is a Jew?" has fallen from public view. We suffer in Stephen Carter's terms (1993) from our own culture of disbelief.

I do not believe that any of the religious movements on their own can adequately address the politicizing of religious discourse precisely because the movements themselves are actors on the political stage. It will take other concerned parties to sponsor and foster pluralistic religious dialogue. Indeed we have been very fortunate to witness organizations such as CLAL, The Hartman Institute, and The Wexner Foundation taking the lead in fostering pluralistic religious dialogue in the Jewish community. Teachers from diverse religious perspectives have helped concerned Jews explore the deeper meanings of religious differences in Judaism and to learn for themselves where they stand on these issues.

Religious pluralism can also be seen as an educational goal. Much of religious education is in the hands of denominational organizations. Yet, there has also been great growth in the domain of communal education: in communal day schools, JCCs, and

Hillel foundations. As these communal contexts wrestle with the approach to take with the Jewish education they offer, they may explore religious pluralism as an important educational goal. In some Hillel foundations one already sees encouraging steps taken in that direction. Summer programs for youth, such as BCI at Brandeis-Bardin, the Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel, and the Genesis Program at Brandeis University, have moved seriously in this direction. In the Boston area an exciting new development is the New Jewish High School, a communal day school that is making religious pluralism the cornerstone of its Jewish educational program. Rather than simply exposing students to many Jewish points of view, this high school has hired a diverse teaching staff that actively encourages students to experience Jewish practice in multiple *minyanim* so that their personal religious choices will be informed by active knowledge, rather than mere habit or opinion (Lehmann, 1996).

What is to be gained from making religious pluralism a deliberate educational goal? My answer relates to how we think about developing Jewish identities. We tend to think of Jewish identity in terms of strength and weakness and hope that a quality Jewish education in all denominational contexts will lead to the development of a strong and lasting Jewish identity. But another way to conceptualize Jewish identity is by breadth: how wide or narrow, inclusive or exclusive an identity one develops. A more exclusive identity may be very strong, but also very narrow. A person might identify with only a select branch of Judaism and cluster of Jews and consider the rest to be less than ideal Jews. A more inclusive identity may be equally strong, but much wider. A person might identify with positive elements in a multiple of Jewish branches and look for the good in a broad variety of Jewish commitments. That person's Jewish identity would be shaped less by a single strand of ideological commitment and more by an unfolding quest to encompass all that is Jewishly significant. I think of Rosenzweig's dictum (1965), "Nothing Jewish is alien to me.

It should be clear that I see no inherent relationship between denomination and breadth: an Orthodox Jew may have either a broad or narrow Jewish identity, and the same is true for Jews of other commitments. But if current trends continue I am not optimistic that any existing denominational Jewish educational system will educate for religious pluralism. Surely some will treat the phenomenon of Jewish diversity with more positive regard than others. But to teach Jews to be tolerant and respectful of difference, although a positive step, falls short of what Eck means by religious pluralism. Only active engagement with and experience of religious difference will educate for religious pluralism in its full sense.

In conclusion, religious pluralism is too precious a principle to be left for political debate alone. Without minimizing the significance of that political debate, I contend that the most pressing question is *not* whether Israel will officially recognize the several legitimate branches of Judaism, but whether the American Jewish community will commit itself to the principles of religious pluralism. It is essential to the Jewish future that we both sharpen our own thinking about religious pluralism and look to those organizations that have already begun to make pluralism a reality for our community (Teperow, 1998).

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