

God Created the World, Not Religion

Paul Mendes-Flohr

Professor, Divinity School, University of Chicago, USA.

**Corresponding Author: Professor, Divinity School, University of Chicago, USA.*

SHORT COMMUNICATION

The late Martin Luther King Jr. once ironically observed that there is no more segregated hour in the week than Sunday morning churchworship. The great civil rights leader was, of course, alluding to the abiding racism that is particularly manifest in the social demographics of religious congregations, and not only in the U.S.A. Analogs can be found in every country and society. While a religious community may be a source of spiritual fellowship and human solidarity, it can often also constitute an invidious barrier of exclusion. In engendering community, religion perforce sets boundaries, sometimes viewing those who stand beyond its borders with benevolent concern and at other times with insidious contempt. As a sardonic German saying has it: “*Und willst Du nicht mein Bruder sein, so schlag’ ich Dir den Schädelein.*” (If you don’t want to be my brother, then I’ll smash your skull.) History offers anguished testimonies to the divisive force of organized religion. The horror that religion can wreak is, of course, not confined to monotheistic faiths, driven as they are by a concept of a privileged access to revealed truth.¹ No faith community, be it theistic or polytheistic, is impervious to the scourge of fanaticism and contempt of the benighted non-believer. Whether the explanation is theological or historical is ultimately a moot question. The emotional and ideological landscape of any religion is informed by multiple factors, and never exclusively by theology and religious teachings.

Nonetheless, one may ask whether religion can promote the harmonious collective life of human beings, and not just of a given group, but all of humanity? The question can be read as requesting one to adumbrate an ideal religion, one that is inherently irenic, tolerant, and promotes the peaceful co-existence of the entire human family. The religious societies that such visions have spun are invariably confined to an intellectual elite and have hardly spoken to the

masses of human beings who continue to find spiritual sustenance in the historical religions, their specific cultural and history memory and an attendant warmth of community. The challenge, it seems to me, is for the intellectual custodians of the various religious traditions to identify those principles and values that may indeed foster, within the given social and historical realities of their respective faith communities, humane and tolerant attitudes and ethical sensibilities that allow, or rather encourage one to reach beyond the limits of one’s co-religionists and embrace all the denizens of the world as one’s fellow human beings.

As an Israeli Jew, I am acutely aware of the painful paradox that while community can provide physical and emotional security, yet at the same time might also serve to perpetuate the human divisions that prompted the founding of the State of Israel. To be sure, the conflict with our neighbors is first and foremost political. One may argue that the conflict between Islam and the West is also at root political. But surely, religious values and commitments do play a role in abetting the conflict. A full analysis of conflicts that are inflected by religious antagonisms must consider the dialectical relation between religion and politics.

With this caveat in mind, I offer the following theological reflections. I take my clue from the German-Jewish philosopher of religion Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), who urged the children of Abraham, -- Jew, Christian, and Muslim – to be ever mindful that “God created the world, not religion.”² We are to regard ourselves as fellow stewards of the created order, in all its dimensions, physical and human. Or, as Rosenzweig’s mentor, the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) tirelessly reiterated, the Oneness of God is the ontological ground of the Oneness of the Creation and *ergo* of humanity.³ Our primary allegiance is thus not to our religious identity but God’s Creation. Our overarching fidelity to

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the God of Creation is the founding *kerygma* of biblical faith; it implores us to celebrate the indivisibility of the planet we are destined to share with our fellow human beings. Our respective religious communities are merely our culturally determined frameworks for us to realize our divinely appointed responsibility towards Creation and one another. To lose sight of this charge is tantamount to denying God's reality.

The Hebrew Bible urges us not to limit our moral compass to our brethren alone, but to extend our fraternal regard to the stranger: "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, you shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be on to you as one born among you, and that shalt love him as thyself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34). In our post-colonial, global culture, the stranger is not only he or her who dwells within our midst. As the African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted, we now live in "a world of strangers." The strangers we are to love are no longer simply "the resident aliens" who dwell among us, but those who also reside afar, beyond the boundaries of our faith and immediate community.⁴ We are, as Appiah puts it, by *force majeure* cosmopolitans, citizens of the cosmos, a shared universe. Hence, our love of the stranger must go beyond mere tolerance.

Tolerance should, of course, not be confounded with sufferance, a passive acceptance of the other, which borders on a blissful indifference. For as the revered Nestor of the liberal Enlightenment Goethe observed, Tolerance qua sufferance "should really only be a passing attitude: it should lead to appreciation. Totolerate is to offence. (Toleranz sollte eigentlich nur eine vorübergehende Gesinnung sein: sie muß zur Anerkennung führen. Dulden heißt beliedigen)."⁵

Since I speak as a Jew, I am obliged to acknowledge that this posture often characterizes classical Jewish attitudes toward the other. Since the destruction of the Second

Temple, Jews in the Diaspora have eschewed active proselytizing, adopting an attitude of "Live and Let Live." While the rejection of missionary activity may indeed promote a commendable tolerance towards other faiths, the seclusive position it often fosters is no longer morally tenable. As the ominous knell of global warming and viral epidemics reminds us, we live in an age in which human destinies are inextricably interlocked. Spiritual and ethical isolation is no longer possible, and is, indeed, a religious scandal.

REFERENCES

- [1] See Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans., Robert Savage (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2009), and Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain. The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- [2] Franz Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," in *Franz Rosenzweig. His Life and Thought*. Presented by Nahum N. Glatzer. Foreword by Paul Mendes-Flohr, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 201.
- [3] Cf. "The unity of God becomes the model for the peoples of the world so that they set their unity in humanity as the goal of their historical consciousness." Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, translated with an Introduction, by Simon Kaplan. Introductory Essay by Leo Strauss (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972), 255. See William Kluback, *The Idea of Humanity Hermann Cohen's Legacy to Philosophy and Theology* (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1987), and Robert Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance. Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).
- [4] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).
- [5] J.W.Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag und C.H. Beck, 2006), No. 151

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