PEACE WITHOUT CONCILIATION

The Irrelevance of "Toleration" in Judaism

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

The interactions that are possible between Jews and non-Jews in modern times are fundamentally different from those of any previous era in Jewish history. Particularly in the Western world, Jews and non-Jews meet each other in civil society on an equal footing. In the secular context of the modern state, a consensus has been reached about religious freedom. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists may live side by side—and each by his own faith shall live.

Despite this infrastructure of toleration, our times are plagued by religious fanaticism and hatred. It seems that the political consensus to "live and let live" has done little to alleviate the intolerance that is inherent to religious belief. The difficulties involved in recognizing the faiths of others are particularly acute when the religions involved are monotheisms. Every religion makes claims to truth that cast doubt on the claims made by other religions, but in monotheist religions those claims tend to be absolute and exclusive. Belief in a unique and omnipotent God who lives beyond the limitations of time, who created the universe and has revealed truths through his prophets, makes it difficult to account for alternatives. A significant proportion of all warfare, ancient and modern, has resulted from the uncompromising beliefs of the monotheist faithful.

My point is that "toleration" is a concept very hard to apply in the context of monotheism. An analogy between science and religion may be useful: monotheist religions are, in one respect at least, like the natural sciences. A polytheism or

Common Knowledge 11:1

henotheism can tolerate more than one claim to truth, even when those claims in some degree conflict. Polytheist and henotheist religions are in this way like the humanities: they make room for, even if they do not thrive on, diverging points of view. The opinions and interpretations of others are taken to be valid if they are seen to be cogent. But in the natural sciences, there is a distinction between truth and falsehood (or at least, between falsified and unfalsified results). The idea of falsehood is at the core of any science—and of each monotheism. There is a true God and there are false gods. The truth of the one God is absolute and exclusive. However desirable religious toleration may be, the basic nature of monotheism is an obstacle to tolerance.

I do not believe that there is a definitive solution to this problem. Religious beliefs cannot, and really should not, figure as options on a list of legitimate alternatives. However, there are partial solutions about which not enough has been said. Judaism, despite the absolute and exclusionary quality of its monotheism, has a side that tends toward openness and toleration. This side of Judaism has also an expression in the Jewish abstention from proselytizing.[1] Even ultimately, Judaism does not view itself as the religion of all people. It is the religion of the Jews alone and is, for almost all its practitioners, inherited. The assumption that Judaism is the religion of one people (and a few unsought converts) is emphatically a normative principle and is important to our discussion because it suggests that, within Jewish doctrine, there is room for the religious beliefs of others. This principle applies not only to the world as it is today but also to the messianic projections that Judaism makes for the future. Although the messianic era represents an ultimate vindication of truth as Judaism understands it—a time when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will assert his dominion over all the world—at that time the peoples of the world will not embrace Judaism and will not come to observe Jewish law. In the closing chapters of his monumental *Code of Jewish Law*, Maimonides gives an account of the end of days. In his portrayal, the messianic realm is one of peace, but not uniformity of faith. According to Maimonides, when Isaiah saw the wolf and the lamb lying down together, what he envisioned was not a change in the nature of creation. Wolves will still be wolves, and lambs lambs; what will change is the relationship between them. At the end of days, the different peoples of the world will not become less different. And because they will not embrace a single faith, the prohibition against gentiles undertaking distinctively Jewish practices will continue.[2] However, each religion will come to share with all the others a small set of fundamental truths, and people everywhere will abandon violence, theft, and oppression.

Jews rarely have had the political power to enforce their beliefs on others. But, as Maimonides suggests, that lack of power does not explain why Jews have

1. On proselytization in Judaism, see Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 46–48.

2. On the prohibition of gentiles from practicing Judaism, see Maimonides, *Book of Judges*, chap. 10:9–10.

refrained from sending missionaries to convert gentiles.[3] The Jewish tradition enshrines one set of expectations for Jews and another for non-Jews. The eleventh chapter of the talmudic tractate Sanhedrin begins with the assurance of Isaiah that "all Israel have a portion in the world to come."[4] The rest of the chapter is dedicated to discussing exactly which transgressions may lead to a Jew's forfeiting that entitlement. The offenses that dominate the discussion are inapplicable to gentiles who have no investment in the Torah per se. One offense for which a Jew forfeits his place in the world to come is denial that resurrection of the dead is intimated in the Torah. A Tibetan lama would not likely make such a denial: a lama might well not believe in bodily resurrection but he would have no reason to deny (or affirm or indeed care) that the doctrine is intimated in an ancient Hebrew text. Such ordinances are irrelevant to most gentiles (though matters are more complex with respect to Christians, who include the Torah in their own Bible). Likewise, if gentiles are forbidden to undertake distinctively Jewish practices (the wearing of phylacteries, for example, or the separation of meat and milk), then their salvation cannot be foreclosed on the grounds that they did not undertake to observe them. In other words, the righteous among the gentiles are not blocked, as transgressor Jews are, from redemption; but righteous gentiles have their own path, different from that of Jews. At the end of the righteous gentiles' path are the same eternal rewards that await the righteous among the Jews.

"Toleration" would not be an accurate name for this doctrine, and certainly the doctrine is not one of religious equivalence. However, the approach that Judaism takes toward righteous gentiles offers a partial solution to the problem of intolerance in monotheist religions. By establishing different sets of expectations for different groups, Judaism makes room for adherents of other faiths to perform their own religious obligations in a way that entitles them to salvation by the God of Israel. While Jews are enjoined to follow 613 commandments of the Torah, the demands that normative Judaism makes of gentiles comprise only seven laws. These six prohibitions and one positive commandment are together known as the Noahide laws because (according to chapter seven of Sanhedrin) they were the series of laws given to Noah after the flood (though they differ little from the basic laws given to Adam).[5] The Noahide laws set a universal standard for gentile religions and embody the truths that, according to Maimonides, the peoples of the world will come to recognize and share at the end of days. Thus, the Noahide laws delineate the boundaries of Jewish religious toleration: failure

3. Maimonides, *Laws of Kings*, chaps. 11–12.

4. The discussion of Isaiah 60:21 opens chap. 11 of Sanhedrin in the Babylonian Talmud (chap. 10 in the Jerusalem Talmud).

5. The one positive command requires the establishment of courts of justice. The six prohibitions are of idolatry, murder, blasphemy (very narrowly defined), incest and adultery, robbery, and the eating of flesh cut from a live animal. The Noahide laws have intermittently, especially during the seventeenth century in Europe, been discussed in the context of international law.

to observe these laws would bar a person or a people from entering their own gate into heaven. (The Jews' gate is not open to them.)

One of the highest principles of the Noahide laws is belief in the one God. Both Islam and Christianity (though Trinitarian doctrine presents a complication) satisfy this key demand and clear the way for Jewish recognition of these religions. But what of—to take more difficult cases—the Indic religions and the various kinds of Buddhism? Again, I do not believe that a definitive solution is possible, but a partial solution may be considered. It is important to introduce a distinction between theology and religious practice. In the ancient religions grouped under the name of Hinduism, there are many gods and local shrines, but the theological principles that guide belief and provide a uniformity of moral standards assume that all the deities revered in India or elsewhere are forms of, expressions of, or names for, one ultimate reality or God. Saivites propose Siva as the best name (among many names) for this ultimacy; Vaisnavites prefer Visnu or Krishna; *atman* is an Upanisadic word for the same principle—and *brahman* is perhaps the most common way among non-Muslim, non-Christian Indians of naming ultimacy. As for Buddhism, the difficulty is not that there is a plethora of gods, though Siddartha Gautama and other buddhas, bodhisattvas, and "incarnate" lamas are often treated as godlike. The difficulty, from the perspective of the Noahide laws, is that it is unclear whether Buddhism is theistic at all. Buddhist thinkers tend to argue that metaphysical beliefs are among the causes of human suffering. (There are parables attributed to the Buddha in which the metaphysician or theologian is likened to one who has been shot by an arrow and is worried about who made the arrow, how it was constructed, and how it flew to its mark, instead of trying to remove it and doctor the wound.) Still, it is not necessarily atheistic to conclude that, because holding metaphysical beliefs leads to pain, it is best to concentrate our attention on proper human behavior. In any case, however controversial the question of whether Buddhism is theistic, it is certainly not *poly*theistic.

By the standards of Jewish law as applied to Jews, Hinduism and Buddhism do not count as monotheistic traditions. However, the essential point of the Noahide laws is that the standards of Jewish law do not apply to non-Jews. Radically pure monotheism is expected by Judaism only from Jews. The Noahide laws do not preclude gentile religions from developing softer, more complex, and compromised forms of monotheism. Under the Noahide laws, it is possible to assume that Hinduism and Buddhism are sufficiently monotheistic in principle for moral Hindus and Buddhists to enter the gentiles' gate into heaven. Jewish law regards the compromises made or tolerated by the world's major religions as ways of rendering essentially monotheistic theologies easier in practice for large populations of adherents. The fierceness of Islamic opposition to such compromises has no counterpart in Judaism. In Islam, it is seriously blasphemous for anyone of

whatever faith to combine belief in the one God with popular ideas about other heavenly powers or with subtle theological doctrines such as the Trinity. Islam cannot tolerate such compromises because the truth that they violate is applicable universally and not simply to Muslims. The problem is that Islam is radically monotheistic (like Judaism) yet is also (unlike Judaism, which is the religion of one people) universalistic as well.

It is an entirely normative principle in Judaism that the monotheism expected of gentiles by the Noahide laws is of a less absolute kind than that expected of Jews. In the Middle Ages, many authorities indeed recognized Christian doctrine (even the doctrine of of the Trinity) as a basically monotheistic belief.[6] One can readily understand how the doctrine of a triune Godhead could contaminate Christianity's claim to be monotheistic. However, Christianity was generally not considered polytheistic or idolatrous, though Maimonides—who did not live in Christendom—dissented from the widespread rabbinic agreement on this point. The concept of the Trinity was represented in the church as a mystery or paradox because it apparently contradicted a central component of their faith in the one God. Thus the Trinity, even though it is an essential feature of Christian theology and not merely one of folk religion, could be taken by Jewish scholars as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the idea of God as one. By Jewish standards as applied to Jews, Trinitarianism is not monotheism. But by the standards of the Noahide laws, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an idolatrous belief to which Judaism can express an objection.

The Noahide laws provide a mechanism for thinking about religious tolerance, but they are not, at least in modern terms, examples themselves of liberal toleration. The Noahide laws presuppose the superior purity of Jewish belief and, to a more limited extent, of Jewish practices; thus, the difference between Judaism's expectations of Jews and its expectations of gentiles suggests a hierarchy of religions. However illiberal this system may sound to modern ears, the existence of a hierarchy of expectations results in a set of rules for defining heresy that do not concern non-Jews. While the simplest violation of belief in the one God constitutes a heresy within the Jewish world, the popular beliefs of gentiles are met with understanding. The less than absolutely monotheist folk beliefs of Christians or Buddhists are taken in Jewish law to be violations of Christianity and Buddhism, religions that are in themselves adequately monotheistic; hence such beliefs are only problematic internally—solely within the discourse of another

6. The most famous medieval Ashkenazic source on monotheism and Trinitarian doctrine is Menachem ben Shlomo (the Meiri), active in Provence in the fourteenth century. For the Meiri's distinction between biblical paganism and later monotheistic faiths, see Rabbi Menachem ben Shlomo, *Beth Habechira* [The temple], ed. Kalman Schlesinger et al. (Jerusalem: Gitler, 1975), 257–58. The Meiri habitually refers to Christian and Muslim believers as *baalei dat* (possessors of a religious truth). For this category as grounds for tolerating Christianity, see his *Hibur Hateshuva* [Essay on repentance], ed. Avraham Sofer (Jerusalem: Kedem, 1976), 47.

religion. Such violations do not affect what Judaism has to say about Christianity or Buddhism or any other religious tradition. The standards of Jewish law cannot be violated where they do not apply.

Judaism does not concern itself with the internal heresies of other religions even when these have arisen to defend standards of monotheism to which Judaism itself adheres. The struggles over iconoclasm in the seventh century, struggles that touched the core of Christian monotheism, left no mark on Jewish writing about Christianity in the period; and the Jewish attitude toward Christianity was unaffected by the emergence of Protestant sects in the sixteenth century, some of which have practices that might be said to resemble those of Judaism more closely than do those of the Catholic Church. The Jewish stance toward Islamic monotheism has been unaffected by the internal struggles between Sunni and Shiite factions, and Judaism has likewise nothing to say about the Sunni Wahhabi struggle to purify Islam of folk practices (for example, grave worship) that contradict the basis of Islamic monotheism. These struggles have had no bearing on Jewish writings about Islam. Judaism is not affected by these internal struggles because they are recognized to occur beyond the boundaries of Jewish law.

The monotheism of the gentiles is a category that rests at the very edge of Jewish law—the *halakha*—while also lying beyond the boundaries of halakhic deliberation. The extreme precision with which the *halakha* defines and categorizes its legal concepts has never been applied to the Noahide laws. Take, as another example, the Noahide prohibition of incest. While the internal standards of Jewish law define incest in great detail, the Noahide laws do not. Ultimately the prohibition applies among gentiles in only some of the cases forbidden to Jews: while a Jew may not marry his brother's ex-wife, a gentile may do so without fear of incest. Similarly, the patriarch Jacob, who lived before the law was given at Sinai, is not censured for having married two sisters, although doing so is expressly forbidden in the Mosaic law. The idea that certain laws of Judaism do not apply to all is an essential feature of the *halakha*. Special standards of religious practice apply to men, while women are exempted from all commandments that must be practiced at a fixed time. The people of Israel are not bound by the special obligations incumbent upon the priesthood: *kohanim*, the descendants of Aaron, must keep from contact with the dead outside their immediate families in order to preserve the ritual purity of the priesthood. And the priesthood is not bound by the same rules of purity that must be observed by the high priest, who cannot attend the funeral of even his own parents and children. The high priest would not think to censure his fellow priests for attending their parents' funerals; a common priest, a *kohen*, would not think to censure an ordinary Jew for attending the funeral of a friend, teacher, or cousin (indeed an ordinary Jew might be censured for not attending). Different standards apply to different groups even

within the Jewish community. The Noahide laws operate on the same principle: differing standards apply to different groups.

But, as I have already indicated, the recognition of difference is not an acknowledgment of equivalence. The high priest's standard of purity is more demanding than that of the common priesthood because he alone enters the holy of holies and approaches the ark of the covenant. A priest's standard of purity is more demanding than that of a common Jew because priests officiate in the Temple of God. Even Elijah Benamozegh, who was perhaps the rabbinic figure most open toward, most appreciative of, Christianity and Islam, viewed the relationship between Judaism and those other religions in hierarchical terms.[7] However open-minded his writings may seem in comparison with those of others in the nineteenth century, Benamozegh was after all chief rabbi of Venice and in every respect Orthodox. Israel was for Benamozegh, as the Torah ordains, a priesthood to the nations—and Benamozegh clearly saw it as a part of that priesthood's task to correct the doctrines of gentile religions when they erred. (He wrote, for instance, that "Christianity is but a distorted Kabbalah.")[8] This hierarchical aspect of Noahide legal thought might be viewed as an unpromising model for regulating relations among the monotheist faiths. But its illiberal quality is, I want to conclude by arguing, what is most promising about the Noahide model. Basically, it does not require most religions to give up, or modify the meaning of, such words as *true* and *truth*. It provides a basis for conversation among religions without the expectation of compromise between or reconciliation of claims. It requires no concession to objectionable beliefs and practices, though the Noahide model does sharply restrict the applicability of one religion's laws to any other's. The Noahide approach, in other words, is a formula for no more than peace. But then, peace is in itself among the very greatest of religious values.

7. The text most relevant to this discussion is Elijah Benamozegh, *Israël et l'Humanité*, edited by Aimé Pallière and published posthumously in 1914. The English edition is *Israel and Humanity*, trans. and ed. Maxwell Luria (New York: Paulist, 1995).

8. Benamozegh, *'Em la-Mikra*, vol. 1 (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1862), 1b (as translated by Moshe Idel in his appendix to the Luria edition of *Israel and Humanity*, 394).