PARADOX OF FAITH:

MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD'S UNIQUE THEOLOGY OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

DAVID JEREMY SEGAL

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Advisor: Rabbi Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Few theologians speak as originally and provocatively as Dr. Michael Wyschogrod. His major work of Jewish theology, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*, along with his prolific collection of essays, raises new ideas and questions that challenge conventional Jewish wisdom at almost every turn. Also, few self-identified Orthodox Jewish thinkers devote so much of their thought to the possibility of gentiles' entering a covenantal relationship with the God of Israel. Wyschogrod's life manifests this strand of his thought in his commitment to Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In his life and thought, two opposing trends converge. On the one hand, there is evident the trajectory of post-biblical Judaism toward enlightened acceptance of non-Jews. Jacob Katz describes this trend in *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, noting the increasingly positive Jewish attitudes toward Christians and Christianity. On the other hand, there is also evident a non-rationalist, almost pre-modern embrace of God's true revelation in Torah. Wyschogrod accepts in faith the Sinaitic revelation as the unerring divine word. His unique marriage of these competing modern and pre-modern impulses embeds a generative tension within his thought. In order to reach a deeper understanding of this tension, several thematic clusters will organize our approach to Wyschogrod's theology.

A Counterbalancing Act

Wyschogrod intends to correct against Jewish theological distortions caused by historical overreactions to external forces. We will refer to this aspect of his thought with

words like *counterbalance*, *counterweight*, and *corrective*. Specifically, Wyschogrod identifies three external forces that have caused such an exaggerated reaction in Judaism: Karaism, Christianity, and rational philosophy. First, as Karaites rejected rabbinic authority, he argues, rabbinite Jews reacted by overemphasizing the authority of the rabbis. Second, as Christian doctrine trumpeted trinitarianism and incarnation, Judaism distanced itself dramatically from any hint of those allegedly foreign and borderline idolatrous ideas. Third, in the case of rational philosophy, Wyschogrod believes that Judaism erred, most visibly under Maimonides' influence, by letting Reason subsume the God of Israel into its all-encompassing ontology.

Because these three strands are deeply intertwined, it is impossible to address any of them in isolation. However, the chapters that follow emphasize different ones in different measure. The first chapter takes up the Karaite problem by examining Wyschogrod's proposed corrective to anti-Karaite errors. The second chapter uses the Shema as a lens through which to examine Wyschogrod's attempt to counterbalance both the anti-Christian and pro-philosophy strands. The third chapter combines all three by surveying Wyschogrod's view of the Noahide Covenant and, through it, the theological relationships between God, Jews, and non-Jews.

Furthermore, actual relations between Jews and Christians figure prominently in Wyschogrod's writing. Especially in the second and third chapters, a commitment to Jewish-Christian dialogue emerges hand-in-hand with the theological conclusions. This commitment falls in line with Wyschogrod's characteristic attitude of righting historical wrongs. He seeks

to take advantage of today's opportunities to reach out to Christians in a new and respectful -- but still Torah-true -- way.

A Theory of Textual Authority

Another major focus of this study is Wyschogrod's theory of Jewish textual authority. A recurring theme in Wyschogrod scholarship -- of which there is not nearly enough[1] -- challenges the legitimacy of his faithfulness to Jewish textual sources, both rabbinic and biblical. Some critics accuse him of being too reliant on the Bible and too dismissive of rabbinic tradition, an orientation which, they suggest, threatens to situate him beyond the pale of mainstream Orthodox Jewish thought. These thinkers point to his lack of self-awareness about his hermeneutical agenda, as well as his imprecise use of rabbinic precedent. Although the present study of these problems is not meant to be exhaustive, we will touch on this tension within Wyschogrod's work and venture some deeper understandings of the dynamics of his thought in this regard.

We will attempt to address the question, *How does Wyschogrod relate to biblical and rabbinic precedents?* We will consider the claims of critics who accuse him of excessive reliance on scripture and neglect of rabbinic tradition. The first chapter will reject Shai Held's assertion of Wyschogrod's "hermeneutical naivete" and offer a more nuanced view of Wyschogrod's interpretive agenda. We will examine and evaluate his hierarchy of Jewish textual authority, wherein scripture has the ultimate say and rabbinic literature provides

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[1] More is on the way: Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik, rabbi of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and grandson of the renowned Modern Orthodox Rav Joseph Soloveitchik, is completing a PhD on Wyschogrod's thought in Princeton University's Religion Department.

secondary commentary on that primary revelation. In due course, it will be necessary to discuss his justification for what he admits to be a more biblical orientation. The first chapter will provide the theoretical foundation for the subsequent two chapters, each of which engages a particular Jewish theological issue: the Shema and the Noahide Covenant, respectively. In these two chapters, Wyschogrod's theory of textual authority will be reexamined through those traditional Jewish filters.

In the end, it is not for this author to stamp Wyschogrod's theology with an Orthodox seal of approval. Though I may gesture in that direction, that theological community must have the final say. Instead, I will conclude with some thoughts on the relevance of Wyschogrod's thought for all Jews, with particular attention paid to his embrace of Jewish-Christian dialogue. We may indeed decide that, in the world of Jewish thought, Wyschogrod is a *b'riah bifnei atzmah*, a "creature of his own kind."[2] But he is such a kind that all Jews, and many Christians, would do well to make him their teacher. Their faith and our shared world would be better for it.

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[2] *Mishnah Bikkurim* 4:5.

CHAPTER ONE: BACK TO THE BIBLE
WYSCHOGROD'S THEORY OF TEXTUAL AUTHORITY

Introduction

Critics have made much of Michael Wyschogrod's unique reading of traditional Jewish texts. Michael Walzer and Peter Ochs have questioned Wyschogrod's faithfulness to biblical and rabbinic text, as well as his transparency about his own interpretive agenda.[3] For the second edition of *Body of Faith,* Wyschogrod added a new preface with a clarification for those readers who had observed his "more biblical than rabbinic orientation."[4] Shai Held has accused Wyschogrod of "methodological and hermeneutical naivete."[5]

I agree with various critics' sentiment that Wyschogrod's thinking is more scripturally than rabbinically focused, and that Wyschogrod rarely elucidates his own hermeneutical principles. However, in contrast to Held's critique I believe that Wyschogrod employs a rather sophisticated interpretive framework. He places ultimate authority within biblical revelation and penultimate authority within rabbinic opinions. The pages he devotes to delineating and justifying this hierarchy deserve our careful attention.

His sophistication is also evident in his treatment of the Shema and the Noahide commands and the conclusions he derives from his unique reading of the classical texts. In both areas, we will see how Wyschogrod's thought compares and contrasts with classical

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[3] Michael Walzer, "Morality and Politics in the Work of Michael Wyschogrod," *Modern Theology* 22, no. 4 (October 2006): 687-692; Peter Ochs, "Epilogue," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 2 (April 1995): 219-227.

[4] Michael Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), xxi; see also xxi-xxv.

[5] Shai Held, "The Promise and Peril of Jewish Barthianism," *Modern Judaism* 25, no.3 (October 2005): 325.

Jewish sources, particularly the relevant rabbinic texts. I will attempt to show that Wyschogrod's approach to rabbinic tradition mirrors his own description of Paul and Paul's opponents: he is "continuous with but also modif[ies] the traditional rabbinic approach to the problem of gentile[s]..."[6]

The hierarchy of authority Wyschogrod describes would seem to prevent him from falling into the Karaite camp, since he values and even emulates the classical rabbinic interpretive endeavor. On the other hand, this orientation also leads him to dismiss certain rabbinic principles more easily than a typical Orthodox Jew would. As a theologian, Wyschogrod's agenda is not simplistically subservient to rabbinic authority, but neither can it rightfully be called anti-rabbinic. Rather, he views the rabbis as a necessary and *necessarily secondary* interpretive complement to the Torah.

Related to this issue is the matter of Wyschogrod's self-definition as an Orthodox Jew. His acceptance of the written Torah as God's true revelation at Sinai satisfies a primary criterion of Orthodoxy. However, his belief in the contingency of rabbinic law raises a problem for his supposed Orthodoxy. Ultimately, it is not for me, a non-Orthodox Jew, to decide whether he is "in" or "out"; nonetheless, I will devote some attention to how we might think more clearly about this problem.

Wyschogrod's Approach to (Rabbinic) Authority

Wyschogrod's affirmation of rabbinic authority is real but limited. What is at stake here is whether Wyschogrod is beyond the pale of rabbinite Judaism. Some critics, he notes

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[6] Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 193.

in the preface to the second edition of *Body of Faith*, have identified him with "what appears a more biblical than rabbinic orientation."[7] This causes consternation among Orthodox readers because of their consensus that "Orthodox Jews are supposed to read the bible through rabbinic eyes because the ancient rabbis transmit the oral Torah, the God-given interpretation of the written Torah, which was revealed alongside the written Torah on Sinai."[8] Veer too far to the biblical side, and you risk being identified as a Karaite, a strictly biblical Jew who rejects rabbinic authority.

In response to this criticism, Wyschogrod affirms his respect for rabbinic authority and interpretation. But he also unequivocally prioritizes the authority of scripture over the rabbis as the primary text of God's covenant with Israel.

> I am not a Karaite. I accept the Sinaitic origin of the oral Torah. But the written Torah is also Sinaitic and therefore has something to teach us. The oral Torah presupposes the written Torah... [I]t is only the written Torah that yields an authoritative text...[9]

Here we encounter Wyschogrod's first of several *ritual* proof-texts for his ideological orientation. Neither of the Talmuds nor even the Mishnah renders the hands unclean or becomes nullified by the inclusion of a textual error. In contrast, both of these characteristics inhere for a sefer Torah, which has a single, authoritative version. "The Vilna Gaon makes corrections as mistakes of scribes [for the Talmud and Mishnah], but he would never do that to scripture."[10]

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[7] *Body of Faith*, xxi.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., xxiii.

[10] David Segal, Unpublished interview with Michael Wyschogrod (New York: November 26, 2009); see Appendix A.

The structure of the liturgical reading of the Pentateuch -- without rabbinic commentary -- might also corroborate Wyschogrod's claim about the relative authority of the bible and the rabbis. Similarly, the daily recitation of the Shema and attached passages from Deuteronomy contains no rabbinic commentary. However, proofs from liturgy can argue both ways. On the one hand, one could say that despite these biblically centered moments, the fabric of the prayer service is rabbinic invention including its centerpiece, the Amidah. On the other hand, one could say that the Torah and the Shema are indeed focal points of the rabbinic liturgy, and their very framing by rabbinic texts serves Wyschogrod's assertion that the rabbis recognized scripture's supreme authority. The question may not hinge as much on the hierarchy of authority as on who may properly interpret scripture. The rabbis reserve that right for themselves. Wyschogrod seems to believe that their right to interpret scripture is legitimate but not exclusive, and that he possesses it, too.

Nevertheless, Wyschogrod is not ignorant of cultural and theological trends within traditional Jewish thought. He admits, "I am a bit more scriptural than many other Jewish thinkers."[11] Elsewhere, he says:

> My Judaism is biblical. It is biblical because the Judaism of the rabbis is biblical. It is, of course, supplemented by the oral Torah, which is considered to have been revealed by God to Moses alongside the written Torah. But the oral Torah is dependent on and is inconceivable without the written Torah. It is the written Torah that is the primary document of revelation.[12]

Wyschogrod's view of the hierarchy of scriptural and rabbinic authority seems plausible intellectually, but it has run into challenges culturally and sociologically in an Orthodox world about which the following joke still has a certain currency: "What does a yeshiva

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[11] Unpublished interview.

[12] *Body of Faith*, xxxii.

bucher think the Tanakh is? A collection of quotes from the Talmud." Wyschogrod himself doesn't think his belief "is particularly controversial" and reminds us that when the rabbis interpret, "they interpret under the presupposition that Scripture is ultimately authoritative."[13]

In another formulation, he sees "the vast body of rabbinic literature as transmitting supplementary revelation to that found in scripture."[14] This statement captures the duality of his view: on the one hand, rabbinic interpretation is revelation, and therefore authoritative; on the other hand, it is supplementary, and therefore subordinate to scripture. He occupies a middle ground between complete Karaitic rejection of rabbinic authority and complete rabbinite acceptance of it.

Wyschogrod's view of the hierarchy of scriptural authority acts as a corrective against what he sees as excessively anti-Karaite rabbinic missteps. He sees himself as a kind of "counterweight" to the phenomenon that,

> in some circles, Judaism has been identified with rabbinic thought and not scripture, and I want to even the balance a little bit.... The more the Karaites went into the anti-rabbinite direction, the more the rabbis went the other direction... It's kind of a dance of death of each side holding on to its position and getting more and more extreme in response to the other guy's.[15]

Wyschogrod seeks a more honest and balanced reckoning of Judaism, even if it leads him to positions that smack of Karaism. He characterizes the Orthodox view that harbors such anti-Karaite sentiment thus: "The written Torah, it is sometimes argued, without the oral Torah is a dangerous document."[16] But Wyschogrod issues a warning of his own: "We must not be so

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[13] Unpublished interview.

[14] *Abraham's Promise*, 226.

[15] Unpublished interview.

[16] *Body of Faith*, xxi.

anti-Karaitic that we lose direct contact with the text of scripture. Respect for the oral Torah does not require erasing the difference between the two Torahs."[17] Moreover, legitimate questions may be raised about the written version of the oral Torah and its faithfulness to the "original" *Torah Sheb'al Peh.*

This hermeneutical middle ground drives Wyschogrod's reading of the Shema and the Noahide covenant. His primarily scriptural focus *without* total disregard for rabbinic interpretation challenges Shai Held's criticisms, which we will now turn to in more depth. Held argues that

> Jewish theology has never been based on a direct encounter with scripture but, rather, on an encounter with scripture as read and interpreted by the Jewish tradition.... At some level, Wyschogrod is aware of this, and he periodically gestures toward the Oral Torah or emphasizes its continuities with scripture. But his theology is, almost exclusively, a theology of scripture; it is scripture, and not its rabbinic commentators, that ultimately interests him. This is, to put it simply, Jewishly unorthodox -- and, quite obviously, Jewishly un-Orthodox.[18]

I believe that Held overstates his case. It is true that Wyschogrod places greater emphasis on the "Word of God" as revealed in Scripture than he does on rabbinic texts. But surely he believes that the rabbis are legitimate in so far as they "hook" their interpretations onto biblical proof-texts. Held is probably right that there is dissonance between Wyschogrod's general approach and mainstream Jewish Orthodoxy, but he fails to address Wyschogrod's critiques of that Orthodoxy, most notably its knee-jerk anti-Karaism. Perhaps it is easier for me, a Reform Jew, to tolerate Wyschogrod's demotion of rabbinic authority.[19] At any rate, it

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[17] Ibid., xxiv.

[18] Held, 318-19.

[19] On the other hand, Wyschogrod lives an ortho*prax* lifestyle, which must be taken seriously as an indication of a significant level of respect on his part for rabbinic tradition.

is fitting at this juncture to examine more closely the theology of Judaism that Held glosses over as exclusively scriptural.

Contrary to Held's implication, Wyschogrod does elucidate his hermeneutic principles. For him, the Torah is revealed in the context of God's relationship with Israel, not as a disembodied set of abstract precepts.

> The law is embedded in this relationship. It presupposes the stories of this relationship. The biblical text intertwines the law with these stories. In short, the law is not a self-contained entity. It is not the deepest layer of God's relationship with the Jewish people. It is an essential part of that relationship but not its foundation.[20]

Jewish legal thinking, he reasons, proceeds from a foundation of Israel's relationship and covenant with God. Law is part of the Jewish narrative, not an objective abstraction attained by philosophical thinking.

Moreover, like Buber and Rosenzweig, Wyschogrod draws a distinction between God's commandments and the rabbinic law. They are not identical. "Ideally, there should be a separate divine commandment for each situation in which a human being finds himself."[21] That not being the case, and direct revelation having ceased after the bible, Wyschogrod grants the necessity of legal reasoning as the only means available to us to answer the question of "what is God's will for me here and now."[22] However, "legal reasoning is a second best."[23] He sounds almost nostalgic in observing that a direct appeal to God for adjudication of a case -- available to Moses regarding Zelophehad's daughters (Num 27:1-11)

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[20] *Abraham's Promise,* 234.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

-- is impossible in our time. One might be tempted at this point to label him a "reluctantly rabbinic" Jew, the rabbis being a distant second to direct discourse with God.

Wyschogrod does not simply reject rabbinic attempts at legal decision-making as second-rate. Rather, he denies the legitimacy of "a relationship to the law that makes the law autonomous as if God had gone into retirement after he revealed the law..."[24] Presumably, then, he would affirm halakhic reasoning that does not attempt to dethrone God and scripture. Here we get one of his more vivid statements of this opinion:

> This is not the time or the place to examine those texts in detail. All I can say is that I do not read [certain rabbinic texts] to be saying that, having given the Torah, God has given the rabbis a blank check to interpret it as they see fit.[25]

Perhaps Held has this statement in mind when he argues that Wyschogrod "fails to reckon with the creativity and originality of Rabbinic Judaism and with its many discontinuities with biblical religion; the claim that the Rabbis were 'essentially obedient to the voice of scripture' requires, to put it mildly, some defense and elaboration."[26] If the block quote above were Wyschogrod's only statement about rabbinic continuity with and respect for scripture, then Held's critique might be justified. However, Wyschogrod defends his view more thoroughly both on the page Held quoted and in *Body of Faith*.[27]

Held quotes out of context when he cites Wyschogrod's view that "the rabbis were essentially obedient to the voice of scripture."[28] In context, this statement concludes a

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[24] Ibid., 235. One is tempted to guess -- and later discussion bears this out -- that Wyschogrod has in mind the Oven of Aknai episode at BT Baba Metzia 59b.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Held, 324. He quotes *Abraham's Promise*, 227.

[27] To be fair to Held, Held's essay was limited in scope to *Abraham's Promise* and was not a venue for engagement with *Body of Faith*.

[28] *Abraham's Promise*, 227; quoted at Held, 324.

thought experiment designed by Wyschogrod to prove empirically the rabbinic continuity with the Torah. He invites us to consider a hypothetical extraterrestrial visitor's observation of all the religious communities on earth. Among them, Orthodox Judaism would surely emerge as the group who follows the way of life of the Torah most closely. Wyschogrod grants that certain practices would be unrecognizable on a strictly scriptural basis. However, this hypothetical case shows "that the Judaism of the rabbis is not fundamentally discontinuous with biblical Judaism."[29]

In fact, this thought experiment might be interpreted as revealing that Wyschogrod's affirmation of rabbinic Judaism is contingent and not absolute. In the current religious landscape, Orthodox Jews following rabbinic law are the community most genuinely living a life of Torah. Now, we might change our label for Wyschogrod from "reluctantly rabbinic" to "relatively rabbinic" Jew. In other words, in a hypothetically ideal world, it seems Wyschogrod would prefer to be a purely scriptural Jew. However, given the realities of post-Sinaitic life, rabbinic legal reasoning is a necessary though ultimately inadequate element of living Judaism.

Wyschogrod addresses this issue more directly in *Body of Faith*. He retells a famous Talmudic story[30] in which each side of a dispute summons "miraculous signs to confirm divine approval of its point of view."[31] When a *Bat Kol* issues forth, supporting the minority side of the debate, the ruling majority of rabbis dismiss it as inadmissible. They quote *lo*

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[29] Ibid.

[30] BT Baba Metzia 59b.

[31] *Body of Faith*, 206.

bashamayim hi[32] as their prooftext for bearing full authority and responsibility for post-Sinaitic halakhic decisions. On one level, this story seems to imply that the end of revelation placed legal authority squarely in the hands of the rabbis. Wyschogrod summarizes the danger of this interpretation: "In short, this text has helped to get God out of the law by establishing the law as an autonomous domain of human interpretation and application."[33] This summation characterizes the unnecessarily anti-Karaite position against which Wyschogrod hopes to act as a corrective.

Wyschogrod rejects the consequence of legal autonomy on several grounds. First, he minimizes the impact that can be ascribed to any one talmudic anecdote "in isolation from the totality of voices we must hear when we think about Judaism."[34] Second, he offers a literary critique that the heavenly voice might have been intended as illusory rather than as the actual voice of God. Most importantly, he raises an objection that cuts to the core of rabbinic interpretive authority: "if the will of God is not the governing criterion of the correctness of any given ruling, then what is?" To be sure, Wyschogrod understands the necessity in human polities and legal systems to designate an ultimate legal authority where the interpretive and legislative buck stops. However, the problem for a religious tradition in this political inevitability resides in its assigning to the rabbis "God's before-the-fact approval of their decisions in perpetuity."[35] It is one thing to accept the political necessity of human legal reasoning. It is quite another to imbue such human decision-making with

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[32] Deut 30:12.

[33] *Body of Faith*, 206.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 207.

objective or theological authority. It is precisely this deification of human legal reasoning which Wyschogrod rejects. But this nuanced rejection should not be taken as a wholesale rejection of rabbinic authority altogether.

Wyschogrod acts as a corrective to centuries of what he sees, in part, as rabbinic overreaching. Ultimate authority must rest with God alone. The duty to interpret devolves upon individual Jews as a contingent necessity. For reasons God neither explains nor owes us, revelation ended after Sinai and we do the best we can with that material. Wyschogrod's faith in the covenantal relationship with God leaves him secure enough in the belief that what God has provided will be sufficient -- and that, should we err, God's mercy will prevail and grant us forgiveness.

In light of his unique and complex notion of law and authority, we must evaluate Wyschogrod's relationship to rabbinic Judaism and Held's criticisms of his weakness in this regard. Perhaps, inspired by Peter Ochs' essay,[36] we might read beyond the plain sense of Wyschogrod's analysis to take in the bigger picture of his interpretive endeavor. If anything, Wyschogrod's own activity of wrestling with scripture to reach conclusions about God's will mirrors the rabbis'. If he accepts his own right as a Jew to do this, then surely he affirms the rabbinic interpretive activity.

In all fairness, we still must not ignore Held's critique: even if Wyschogrod accepts the rabbis' engagement with scripture as valid, he does not necessarily elaborate on how he evaluates the rabbis' premises about their own authority. The most we can say is that he respects those rabbinic authorities who respect God's supreme authority. All things

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[36] See esp. Ochs, 219-220.

considered, it is a distortion to call Wyschogrod anti-rabbinic or even non-rabbinic. He is a rabbinic Jew in so far as he redefines “rabbinic” to include, by definition, ultimate deference to God’s word as revealed at Sinai in the Torah. Now, we will see how this unique orientation manifests in two areas of Wyschogrod’s thought.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SHEMA

COVENANTAL EXCLUSIVITY AND PLURALISM

Introduction: The Danger of Philosophy

Fundamental to Michael Wyschogrod's thought is that it is precisely that -- *thought* -- and not *philosophy of religion*. Unlike philosophy, which rationalizes to the point of subsuming the being of its object into a broader framework, thought "does not interrupt its obedience to explore the rationality of the command... The results of thought will always be partial, incomplete, even fragmentary."[37] In this regard, Wyschogrod owes much to the influence of Karl Barth, the Christian theologian about whom he writes:

> Reading a page of Barth is something like shock therapy because it introduces the reader or the listener to a frame of reference that attempts only to be true to itself and its sources and not to external demands that can be satisfied only by fitting the Church's message into their mold, a mold foreign to it and therefore necessarily distorting.[38]

The same could be said about Wyschogrod by substituting "Judaism's" for "the Church's" in the above quotation. For Wyschogrod, the truth of Torah as God's revelation to Israel is axiomatic. From this starting point we can proceed to examine his notion of the nature of the Shema and, through it, the contours of biblical monotheism and its heirs. The discussion will focus primarily on Wyschogrod's essay "The One God of Abraham and the Unity of the God of Jewish Philosophy"[39] but will also take into account other sources.

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[37] *Body of Faith*, 174. See also *Body of Faith*, Chapter 2, for an extended discussion of the danger philosophy poses to religion.

[38] Ibid., 79.

[39] *Abraham's Promise*, 29-42.

It is necessary to begin with Wyschogrod's caution against theology because it is essential to understanding his conception of biblical monotheism as expressed in the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4. As a defender of biblical faith, he seeks to raise Jews' awareness about the distortional power of metaphysical philosophy when applied to Judaism. Improper understanding of the biblical texts that speak of the oneness of God may "turn the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into a metaphysical Absolute that has very little relationship to the God who entered into covenant with Abraham and who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt."[40] We already begin to sense where Wyschogrod is taking us in his discussion of the Shema. This will not be a Maimonidean proof of the absolute inner oneness of God's being. Rather, the reader is being primed for a very different kind of claim, one that depends primarily on Jewish faith in the Torah, and not the abstract ontology of the philosopher. His theory of the Shema acts as a corrective against the unwelcome influence of philosophy and, as we will see, to excessively anti-Christian Jewish teachings.

As we established in the previous chapter, Wyschogrod's thought contains a unique and provocative blend of scriptural and rabbinic hermeneutics. His argument for understanding the Shema and its implications for monotheism hinges on both biblical and rabbinic sources. As we saw already in his defense of the primacy of scripture, here too he employs ritual and liturgical proofs to support his claims. We must approach skeptically the extent to which Wyschogrod tacitly accepts rabbinic opinions, as we examine the textual underpinnings of his claims.

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[40] *Abraham's Promise*, 30.

The Shema as a Declaration of Loyalty

The centrality of the Shema in rabbinic and contemporary Jewish consciousness is not difficult to assert. For Wyschogrod, it is enough to note the rabbis' requirement of the Shema's recitation (together with Deuteronomy 6:5-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41) twice daily. He is careful to point out that, despite some rabbinic disagreement about the biblical origin of the recitation of that entire set of verses, consensus exists for the single verse of the Shema itself.[41] He is less careful in his failure to acknowledge that the centrality of the Shema or its commanded recitation in the biblical context is impossible to prove. On this point, he has absorbed the rabbinic interpretation of the Shema quite uncritically.

The crux of the matter resides in the interpretation of the word *echad*, usually translated as "one." Wyschogrod takes a rabbinic cue to dwell on the particular meaning of this word. He quotes the Babylonian Talmud where Symmachus and R. Aha ben Jacob agree that one who dwells on the word *echad* will have his days prolonged.[42] With the typical interpretation of *echad* in place, the commonly accepted but,Wyschogrod will claim, fallacious translation of the Shema is: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." This translation makes the Shema read as if "to attribute to God a particular quality, namely oneness.... Our inquiry has now taken a metaphysical turn."[43] In the common understanding of the Shema, then, it is a Jewish doxology about God's indivisible, essential oneness.

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[41] See BT Berachot 21a for more on whether "these words" commanded to be recited in Deut 6:6-7 refers to the Shema itself (Deut 6:4) or to the entire Torah.

[42] *Abraham's Promise*, 31; he quotes BT Berachot 13b. Wyschogrod himself should have many more days ahead of him, for he has devoted an entire essay to the "prolongation" of the *echad*!

[43] *Abraham's Promise*, 31.

For the Western reader, says Wyschogrod, the idea of oneness inevitably leads us to a metaphysical concept, based on ancient philosophy promulgated by Parmenides and winding its way, through the Medieval period, into Jewish sources by way of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides. The details of this part of Wyschogrod's argument need not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say that he rejects as non-biblical the obsession with metaphysical oneness that characterizes Parmenides, Saadia, Maimonides, and most of later Jewish thought on the subject. He comments with a note of veiled sarcasm that Jewish philosophers like Saadia and Maimonides "refused to notice the Bible's lack of interest in...the problem of anthropomorphism,"[44] which, thanks to Saadia, is attached also to oneness. Saadia and Maimonides understood the corporeality of an anthropomorphic God as inviting the possibility of ascribing multiple attributes and distinctions to God. Such multiplicity indicates a threat to the absolute ontological oneness of God, which neither Jewish philosopher was willing to compromise.

Now we arrive at the substance of Wyschogrod's insight about the Shema: "it is not making a metaphysical statement."[45] It could not be speaking in these terms because ontology is a conceptual framework completely foreign to the Bible. Rather, in Wyschogrod's words:

> What Deuteronomy 6:4 does assert is that the Jewish people is loyal to and recognizes as God only J. and no other God. It is really an expression of loyalty to J., of everlasting obligation to serve him and no one else. The correct translation of

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[44] Ibid., 34.

[45] Ibid., 35.

> Deuteronomy 6:4 is therefore: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is Our God, the Lord Alone.”[46]

This non-rational interpretation of the Shema reflects Wyschogrod’s Barthianism. Unlike the philosophers or the 19th-century Reform Jews would have it, the Shema is not a statement of metaphysical truth but of covenantal relationship between God and Israel. As Shai Held put it,

> Wyschogrod demonstrates quite convincingly that the Shema is not a philosophical formulation of God’s metaphysical oneness but, rather, an impassioned declaration of covenantal fidelity -- “Adonai echad” means not that “God is one” in His inner nature but that “God alone” is to be worshiped. If philosophical monotheism is concerned with abstract truths about a transcendent deity, its scriptural counterpart is concerned with the concrete interactions of a personal God and His people.[47]

Later in our discussion, we will see how Wyschogrod couples the idea of exclusive Jewish covenant with the possibility of non-Jews being in relationship to God in other ways. Reclaiming the Shema as a loyalty statement rather than a metaphysical rule paves the way for Wyschogrod’s unique theology of other faiths.

In typical Wyschogrodian fashion, the first argument brought to prove his claim about the Shema relies on biblical narrative context. Moses delivers this sentence during an extended speech to the Children of Israel in which he repeatedly urges them to obey God’s commandments. Given all the missteps along the journey already, most notably the sin of the golden calf, it is no wonder that God and Moses choose this moment to reiterate the need for obedience and loyalty to God alone. The Shema “is spoken in the context of a great fear, the

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[46] Ibid. This echoes the Jewish Publication Society translation of this verse. “J.” is Wyschogrod’s convention for representing the tetragrammaton, sometimes spelled YHWH in other sources.

[47] Held, 317.

fear that the people will be disobedient."[48] Thus in its biblical context, the Shema expresses a divine anxiety about Israel's divided loyalties and the possibility of worshiping other gods along with YHWH. This is not merely a hypothetical possibility; we have already seen the people in whole and in part wander into foreign-god territory. In this context, it would be nonsensical for God or Moses to be emphasizing God's metaphysical oneness. Rather, the Shema emphasizes the exclusivity of Israel's relationship with God.

The words of the V'ahavta, immediately following the Shema, substantiate Wyschogrod's contextual claim. The words "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might"[49] expand on the idea of loyalty established by the Shema's *echad* in the preceding verse. Total devotion to God precludes devotion to other gods. The wholeness of loyalty demanded "is designed to rule out the possibility that God fears: a partial service, combined with service of another god or of other gods.... Service of J. cannot be combined with some degree of loyalty to another God...."[50] Wyschogrod would agree that the Shema's understanding in Jewish thought has been as a declaration of "the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven."[51]

Wyschogrod's contextual reading of the Shema-V'ahavta is compelling. In the broader context of a speech urging allegiance to God's laws and the local context of how to love God fully, the Shema is intelligible as a call to absolute loyalty between the Israelites and God. It is not a statement about God's ontological unity. Furthermore, the rabbinic

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[48] *Abraham's Promise,* 35.

[49] Deut 6:5.

[50] *Abraham's Promise,* 36.

[51] *Encyclopedia Judaica,* 1371. For further details of Wyschogrod's liturgical argument, see esp. *Abraham's Promise*, 36-37.

selection of texts after the Shema in the daily liturgy emphasizes the dangers of Israelite disloyalty to God more than the oneness of God. In fact, the biblical and rabbinic context so far delineated can even be read to imply that other gods might exist -- since the deep anxiety expressed by them is God's fear that Israel will worship others. Wyschogrod quotes a modern scholar to set up a sort of straw man for his own exegesis of the Shema. Yehezkel Kaufmann wrote, "It is commonly assumed that the religion of YHWH began as henotheism or monolatry, recognizing him as sole legitimate god in Israel, but acknowledging the existence of other national gods."[52] If this is the case, it calls into question the authenticity of Judaism's reputation of having brought pure monotheism into the world.

Wyschogrod's originality is evident in his solution to the problem of biblical monotheism. He asserts that we need not take a position at this stage on whether or not other divine beings exist or whether their supposed worship by non-Israelites is legitimate or mistaken. "If J. demands loyalty," he writes, "then this demand is not based on default as if J. must be worshiped because there are no other gods who can be worshiped, but irrespective of whether there are other gods."[53] If Israel only has eyes for YHWH, he argues, then the existence of other potential gods becomes moot. Of course, as Israel encounters other peoples who do indeed worship other gods, then the problem begins to assert itself with a practical urgency that cannot be addressed without serious consideration of the complicated Jewish history of this idea.

Having tried to establish the biblical-early rabbinic Shema-concept as a statement of covenantal loyalty and submission to commandments without regard for the question of other

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[52] *Abraham's Promise,* 36; quoting Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel,* 8.

[53] *Abraham's Promise*, 36.

gods' existence and worship, Wyschogrod makes a striking claim about the slippery slope between monolatry and strict monotheism. It is worth quoting him more fully here:

> While it is true that theoretically it is possible to believe that the Jewish people are obligated to serve J. only and that other nations are entitled to worship other gods, it is not difficult to understand that a strong conviction that the Jewish people may only worship J. tends to lead to the corollary belief that he is the only god who should be worshiped by anyone.[54]

It is this gray area -- between internal covenant loyalty and external triumphalist monotheism -- that animates Wyschogrod's unique approach.

In addition, we may point to this analysis as proof of Wyschogrod's belief in a post-biblical evolution of Jewish belief. If his critics were correct, that he is a strictly scriptural theologian, then his explication of the Shema would end after contextualizing the biblical verse. Yet Wyschogrod's analysis continues, and he offers us a nuanced and complicated understand of this centerpiece of Jewish thought and practice. In his analysis, his respect for rabbinic interpretation is evident, even as he challenges the positions of certain great rabbinic figures.

To justify the allegedly natural corollary belief in God's oneness, Wyschogrod again uses rabbinic liturgy as prooftext. In this case, he cites the Rosh Hashanah Amidah's quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4 and the related invocation of Zechariah 14:9. In the case of the Shema's quotation, we find it couched in terms of future unification -- not of God's *being*, but of *worship* of God. Similarly, the Zechariah verse ("And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall the Lord be one, and his name one"), itself quoted in the traditional Aleinu, articulates a hope in a future unification. Eschewing the philosophers' and

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[54] Ibid., 37.

kabbalists' interpretations of these verses, Wyschogrod reiterates that the issue is the parameters of worship, not the ontology of other divinities or the potential multiplicity of divine attributes. "The issue is not God becoming metaphysically one when he was not metaphysically one at an earlier point. The hope is that God will become the only one worshiped anywhere in the world."[55] Now we will follow Wyschogrod's interpretive shift from an apparent defense of monolatry to an almost paradoxical combination of Jewish particularism and universalism.

At this point the discussion takes a "decisive turn."[56] Up to now, Wyschogrod has given the impression of trying to reclaim a biblical understanding of the Shema as a statement of loyalty.[57] This sensibility was then tempered somewhat by the rabbinic evolution from internal loyalty to the apparent corollary of external preferentialism: from *our* God to *the* God. Now we arrive at the real crux, so to speak, of Wyschogrod's argument, as well as the core paradox of his thought. For "the issue of the oneness of God really deals with the relationship of Israel and the nations to the God of Israel and of Israel and the nations to each other."[58]

One might have thought that Wyschogrod's embrace of rabbinic notions of divine exclusivity resonate with overtones of Jewish triumphalism. It is worth taking this line of thinking several steps further before stepping back from it. When he declares, "The task of

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[55] Ibid., 39. See also Abraham ibn Ezra on Deut 6:4.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Of course, the difficulty here is that he mixes the rabbinic emphasis on the Shema as a distinct unit with his own emphasis on the biblical context. This reading seems to be another instance of his *selectively* rabbinic interpretive agenda.

[58] *Abraham's Promise,* 39.

Israel is to proclaim that only J. is God,"[59] it sounds like he may be cooking up a recipe for Jewish evangelism. In one sense, he is doing just that: "some kind of educational task seems to devolve on Israel."[60] If YHWH is our God, and we truly hold out hope for a day of unification when all peoples will worship YHWH, then we must have a role to play in extending the relationship between YHWH and humanity. This educational task translates into interfaith dialogue, the importance of which Wyschogrod's life affirms. The evangelism, however, should be about spreading awareness of the Noahide Covenant among non-Jews (as we will discuss in the next chapter) and not about converting them to Judaism.

At any rate, we are back to redefining the Shema in terms of Israel's relationship with other nations and their relationship to the God of Israel. Wyschogrod's "dialectical embrace of covenantal particularism and theological universalism"[61] plays out here in an interesting way. Wyschogrod believes both in the exclusive truth of the Jewish covenant with God *and* in the possibility of true revelation in other religions. Here we begin to see how Wyschogrod draws limits around what may be deemed true revelation by God to non-Jews.

Most important at this stage is a foundational point, assumed in Wyschogrod's thought but rarely if ever stated explicitly: to understand Israel's or YHWH's relationship with a particular set of non-Jews, one must engage deeply with the theology and practice of those non-Jews. Namely, one must engage in interfaith dialogue through interpersonal relationship. Wyschogrod's own life, of course, attests to this assumption. We should not ignore the imperative to dialogue at the heart of his theology. Dialogue for Wyschogrod

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[59] Ibid., 40.

[60] Ibid., 39.

[61] Held, 325.

emerges as an urgent theological necessity -- not merely as a modern nicety -- out of the sources of Judaism. If Israel's role is to share the truth of YHWH with others, and to determine whether their religious lives evidence true relationship with the God of Israel, then how else to accomplish this dual task than through engagement with others? Thus we have come to the clever paradox of Wyschogrod's thought: it is precisely because of Israel's true, exclusive revelation that we are duty-bound to reach out to non-Jews with regard to what may be their experience of God's presence.

Conclusion

To the modern -- and certainly the liberal -- reader, Wyschogrod's embrace of interfaith dialogue is attractive. He acknowledges the need to engage the sacred stories of the three monotheistic religions to better understand their relationships to God and each other. "But if the question is not primarily whether there is one or more gods but whether the one God who exists is J. or someone else, then the different stories told in the three faiths become far more important."[62] Interfaith dialogue's proper end, it seems, must involve the evaluation of other faiths' truth claims. For Wyschogrod, the standard becomes: to what extent do other faiths affirm the God of Israel and his ongoing covenant with the Jewish people?

In the end, Wyschogrod fudges a bit on the degree of difference between these three religions. He acknowledges many scriptural similarities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And he wonders aloud how much disjunction between scriptures is possible before we determine that the three scriptures actually speak about different Gods. We are left wanting

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[62] *Abraham's Promise,* 40.

by his general statement, “it is very significant that we all look forward to the unification of the human family in the common service of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because only then will God and God’s name be one.”[63] Perhaps because of the limited scope of a single essay, this sweeping statement betrays Wyschogrod’s usual attention to theological detail.

Just when we think he has left us hanging, Wyschogrod surprises us with a complex concluding paragraph. In one sense, he ends where he began, warning against philosophical theology in favor of a biblical sensibility. But there is more to his anti-metaphysical, Heidegger-influenced rhetoric this time. When he warns against placing God within a more all-encompassing framework of being -- as pagans and philosophers do -- he lays the groundwork for addressing the problem Christian Trinitarianism poses for Judaism. Historically, Judaism has had a tortured and tortuous relationship with the Trinity. In contrast to much of the history of Jewish responses to the Trinity, Wyschogrod claims that the

> Jewish understanding of God is intact as long as no power or structure is posited that is equal to God and that is in a position to oppose successfully the will of God. In spite of all the difficulties Christian trinitarian teaching poses for Judaism, the absence of the theme of conflict among the persons of the Trinity maintains trinitarianism as a problem for rather than a complete break with Judaism.[64]

Reading between the lines, and in light of our exploration of the Shema, we might take Wyschogrod’s bold statement to mean that, despite its trinitarian notions, there is a species of Christianity that affirms monotheism and worships the God of Israel alone. Understanding Christianity this way must take into account, of course, Christianity’s attitude toward Jewish

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[63] Ibid., 41.

[64] Ibid., 42.

people in addition to Jewish *doctrines*. To that end, Wyschogrod cites a strikingly hopeful verse, Zechariah 8:23:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת בַּיָּמִים הָהֵמָּה אֲשֶׁר יַחֲזִיקוּ עֲשָׂרָה
אֲנָשִׁים מִכֹּל לְשֹׁנוֹת הַגּוֹיִם וְהֶחֱזִיקוּ בִּכְנַף אִישׁ יְהוּדִי
לֵאמֹר נֵלְכָה עִמָּכֶם כִּי שָׁמַעְנוּ אֱלֹהִים עִמָּכֶם׃

> Thus said YHWH of Hosts: In those days, ten men from all the languages of the nations will take hold — they will take hold of the Jew by a corner of his cloak and say, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

Redemptive unification will come, in Wyschogrod’s vision, not when all peoples convert to Judaism but when they recognize the Jews’ special relationship with God. Through the Jewish covenant, all humanity may be redeemed. It is a messianic hope, grounded in the paradoxical combination of Jewish particularism and divine universalism.

Wyschogrod attempts to counteract the damage done to Judaism by the unwelcome influence of philosophy and metaphysics, and at the same time he lays the conceptual foundation for his Jewish view of non-Jews. By what seems an authentically biblical and rabbinic -- if extra-halakhic -- orientation, he has led us to a new understanding of the Shema. He has located within that central prayer the very paradox at the center of his thought: that the God of Israel has chosen an exclusive covenant with the Jewish people, yet still offers himself in relationship to non-Jews. For them to enter that relationship demands that they accept both God’s elect people, Israel, and his special requirements for non-Jews. Those special requirements are known in Jewish tradition as the Noahide commandments, to which our discussion now turns.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NOAHIDE COVENANT

LAW & NARRATIVE, JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

Introduction

In Wyschogrod's thought, the Noahide episode and commandments define the relationship between Israel and gentiles, and between gentiles and the God of Israel. Wyschogrod derives from the narrative of Genesis 9 a sense of theological humility. That is, the very example of God's revelation to Noah and his sons forces us to grant the possibility that God could have spoken to non-Jews at other times. Our understanding of the Shema, outlined in the previous chapter, entails Israel's responsibility to educate the gentiles about the revelation to Noah. In this chapter, we will turn our attention to the issue of how Wyschogrod understands the content of the Noahide Covenant and its implications for Judaism and other faiths.

Textual Background

To better understand Wyschogrod's interpretation of the Noahide covenant, we should begin with the Torah's account through a careful reading of Genesis 9:1-11. Having just emerged from the ark after 40 days and nights, Noah and his sons receive God's blessing, along with several commands. These commands include procreation, recalling that commanded of Adam and Eve:

> [God] said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."[65]

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[65] Gen 9:1, recalling Gen 1:28 but omitting וכבשה, the command to the first humans to "conquer" the earth as well.

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ׃

Following this command, God emends Adam's originally vegetarian diet[66] to allow Noah and his sons to eat any living creature, provided it does not still contain its lifeblood. God continues by reaffirming the sanctity of human life,[67] establishing what looks like capital punishment for murder. The standard of authority, we should note, is not an abstract ethical principle but the reality of humanity's having been created in God's image:

> "He who spills the blood of man, by man shall his blood be spilled, for in the image of God did [God] make man."[68]
> שֹׁפֵךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשָּׁפֵךְ כִּי בְצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם׃

The assertion of divine authority legitimizing these commands becomes a significant legal basis for the rabbis' and Wyschogrod's understanding of the Noahide Covenant.

In verses 8-11, God compounds Noah's blessing and commands by establishing a covenant with him and his offspring:

> "I hereby establish my covenant with you [plural] and your seed after you... And I will fulfill my covenant with you."[69]
> וַאֲנִי הִנְנִי מֵקִים אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם וְאֶת־זַרְעֲכֶם אַחֲרֵיכֶם׃
> וַהֲקִמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם

The language used here parallels the covenantal moment between God and Abraham and Abraham's seed. It seems that Wyschogrod notices this parallel: as the Abrahamic covenant defines the Jews' relationship with God, so too does the Noahide Covenant define non-Jews' relationship with God. Once God sets the rainbow as the sign of the covenant, God describes

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[66] See BT Sanhedrin 59b and Rashi on Gen 9:3.

[67] Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* on Gen 9:5-6, p. 61.

[68] Gen 9:6.

[69] Gen 9:9, 11.

it to Noah as “the covenant that I have established between Myself and all flesh that is upon the earth.”[70] The Torah thus establishes the universality of this Noahide covenant.[71]

The rabbis of the Talmud approach this text with a characteristic interest in its legal implications. Their guiding questions when approaching this material might be summarized as *what is the legal status of non-Jews in Jewish law?* and *on what authoritative basis do we stake a Jewish view of non-Jews?* One of the central rabbinic texts on this subject occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 56a-60a. The discussion of non-Jews emerges out of a mishnah about a legal case concerning the parameters of witness testimony and blasphemy convictions. The question arises whether non-Jews are also subject to the prohibition against blasphemy.

The term used here for non-Jews is *ovdei kochavim* -- literally, “star worshippers” -- a common rabbinic term for gentiles.[72] That the rabbis’ semantic field for *ovdei kochavim* includes “idolaters” and “gentiles” speaks to the normative classical rabbinic assumptions about and aversion to non-Jews. Probably for a combination of theological, historical, and sociological reasons, the rabbis often harbored a pervasive distrust for gentiles as neighbors,

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[70] Gen 9:17.

[71] One could raise an objection that the very inclusion of *all flesh* -- meaning animals -- and not simply *all humanity* diminishes the ethical authority of this covenant. If animals are included, then moral responsibility and adherence to so-called Noahide commandments cannot be part of this covenant. Ultimately, the implications of this possible objection are beyond the scope of this discussion.

[72] The discourse quickly finds its way from *oved kochavim* to *bnei Noach* a few lines later on 56a, indicating the closely associated use of these terms for gentiles.

business partners, rulers, and ethical agents.[73] Wyschogrod will have to contend with this legacy when he attempts to develop a less dismissive Torah-believing orientation toward non-Jews. I use "gentiles" and "Noahides" somewhat interchangeably, with the latter appearing more often in cases with specific references to the Noahide laws.

The first legal opinion cited in the gemara's discussion contains a duality about gentiles that expresses an overarching sensibility shared by the rabbis and Wyschogrod. To put it simply: the Noahides are like Jews in some ways, but altogether different in others. In the words of the Gemara:

> תנו רבנן איש. מה תלמוד לומר 'איש איש'? לרבות את העובדי כוכבים שמוזהרין על ברכת השם כישראל ואינן נהרגין אלא בסייף, שכל מיתה האמורה בבני נח אינה אלא בסייף.
>
> The Rabbis taught: "A man" [i.e., Lev. 24:15, the verse describing the punishment blasphemy incurs, reads *ish ish* when it could have simply read *ish*]. Why does the Torah say *ish ish*? To include gentiles, who are warned about blasphemy [lit. blessing the name] like Israel, but who are killed only by the sword [i.e. not by stoning, as an Israelite would be], for any death stated for the Sons of Noah is only by sword.[74]

Several important interpretive moves occur in this passage. First, we note in this text the rabbis' interchangeable usage of *oved kochavim* and *bnei Noach*. Both terms refer to non-Jews. *Bnei Noach* as a term of reference to non-Jews appears to situate them within the Noahide commandment structure. The difference between the two terms is a matter of context.

Second, we should uncover the assumption behind the phrase *shemuzharin...k'yisrael*, "[gentiles] who are warned...like Israel." This dependent clause rests on the rabbinic premise

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[73] One medieval exception to this general rule is the Me'iri, a 13th century rabbi and halakhist whose legal opinions were characterized by a generous attitude toward contemporary Christians. We should be careful not to exaggerate the Me'iri's importance and influence, even as we may find his views attractive today.

[74] BT San 56a.

that the Noahides received warnings against certain behaviors. With this statement, the rabbis implicitly affirm their belief that Genesis 9 describes a moment of real revelation by God to *bnei Noach*. That revelation must have contained very specific legal content about *birkat hashem.*[75] Noahides are *k'yisrael*, "like Israel," in that they are commanded by divine authority to obey certain laws. This is a striking gesture toward the rabbinic belief that the God of Israel is also the God of all humanity, who should be recognized by gentiles as such.

However, despite this superficially "big tent" idea of God, Israel and gentiles are destined for different relationships with God and different legal standards. God joins them and enjoins them in different terms. We must not overlook the allowance for external pluralism embedded in the rabbis' view; Wyschogrod will pick this up and run with it, so to speak. However, we must not exaggerate it either.

Further evidence of the rabbis' approach to Noahide obligation can be found in BT Sanhedrin 59a-b. A question arises about an apparent redundancy between the Noahide prohibition against eating the blood of an animal and the similar Sinaitic prohibition.[76] Why repeat it at Sinai if it was already revealed to Noah? This question leads to a broader question about the relationship between those laws revealed to *bnei Noach* after the flood and the *mitzvot* revealed to Moses and the Israelites at Sinai. R. Yose son of Hanina states the following principle:

> למה לי למיכתב לבני נח ולמה לי למשני בסיני? כדרבי יוסי בר' חנינא, דא"ר יוסי בר' חנינא כל מצוה שנאמרה לבני נח ונשנית בסיני, לזה ולזה נאמרה. לבני נח ולא נשנית בסיני, לישראל נאמרה ולא לבני נח.

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[75] We will explore further below how they interpolated rather specific and diverse legal content within the Noahide revelation.

[76] Cf. Gen 9:4 and Deut 12:23, cited at BT San 59a.

> Why is it written for *bnei Noach* and repeated at Sinai? It is according to R. Yose ben R. Hanina, who said: Every mitzvah that was said to *bnei Noach* and repeated at Sinai -- it was said for both [Noahides and Israelites]. [Every mitzvah that was said] to *bnei Noach* and not repeated at Sinai -- it was said for Israel and not for *bnei Noach*.[77]

The particularly complex halakhic wrangling that follows need not occupy us in this discussion. For our purposes, it is enough to point out the unmistakable rabbinic assumption, once again, that the God of Israel revealed a set of authoritative demands to the Noahides. The revelation to Israel at Sinai changed certain details but did not nullify the authority of the previous Noahide revelation.

The conversation continues to reveal the gemara's opinion of one of the major differences between the Noahide and Israelite revelations. In the words of the stam,

> ליכא מידעם דלישראל שרי ולעובד כוכבים אסור.
>
> There is nothing that is permitted for an Israelite and forbidden for a gentile.[78]

One commentary suggests that the Sinai covenant increased the Israelites' sanctity over mere Noahides through the observance of additional commandments.[79] It is not unreasonable to read a note of Jewish chauvinism into rabbinic text in general, and in this text in particular. Only a few lines later, the Gemara introduces an extra-halakhic objection that betrays the authorial voice's disdain for Noahides. It wonders rhetorically whether the Noahide prohibition against stealing -- even something of trifling value, which Israelites are said to forgive -- challenges the previous assertion that Israelite law is stricter than Noahide law. The Gemara's solution, when it cannot rely on legal argumentation, is to resort to what amounts to an ad hominem (or ad *homines*) attack:

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[77] BT San 59a.

[78] Ibid.

[79] See Artscroll Sanhedrin, p. 59a[4], n. 27.

לאו בני מחילה נינהו:

They [Noahides] are not [the type of] people who pardon [even negligible stealing].[80]

The Gemara's reasoning avoids the unwanted outcome of finding Noahide law to be stricter than Israelite law, by declaring Noahides themselves inferior to Israelites in their willingness to forgive small thefts. Statements like this open the door for Wyschogrod and other critical readers to challenge the absolute authority of rabbinic opinions. If the rabbis are vulnerable to socio-historical influences, then perhaps we are entitled to question their rootedness in their ultimate authority, the Torah itself. This will be Wyschogrod's modus operandi, and it will be our task to examine the legitimacy of his selective reading. Furthermore, if we found ourselves face to face with gentiles who *were* the type of people who possess this quality of forgiveness, then we would have to reevaluate the rabbinic reasoning on this point. In other words, aside from being chauvinistic, this rabbinic statement -- even if true -- is contingent on historical, social, and cultural realities.

One more passage in the Gemara deserves our attention at this time. On Sanhedrin 58b we find a litany of Noahide laws and their punishments. One of these is stated by R. Hanina, whose prooftext and legal reasoning are of interest to us:

> עובד כוכבים שהכה את ישראל חייב מיתה, שנאמר: "ויפן כה וכה וירא כי אין איש ויך את המצרי וגו'."
> A gentile who strikes an Israelite is liable for death, as it is said, "[Moses] turned this way and that, and he saw that there was no man, and he struck the Egyptian..." (Exod 2:12).[81]

What strikes the reader of this opinion is its boldness. Hanina derives this death penalty liability from a narrative verse in the Torah, not from a legal *pasuk*. In determining a detail of Noahide legality, Hanina resorts not to the Noahide covenant but to the Exodus narrative.

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[80] BT San 59a.

[81] BT San 58b.

Moses striking the Egyptian taskmaster becomes Hanina's paradigm for understanding a particular aspect of Jewish-Gentile relations. To be sure, further halakhic consideration of Hanina's suggested law may lead us to evidence that Jewish tradition marginalized it for all practical purposes. Maimonides, for example, agrees in principle but declares this command unenforceable by an actual court of law.[82]

In addition, the rabbis in this Sanhedrin passage and elsewhere interpolate particular legal content well beyond the plain meaning of Genesis 9. According to the JPS commentary,

> There is no rabbinic unanimity as to either the number of "Noachide commandments" or their contents... The list that enjoys the widest consensus is as follows: The prohibitions against (1) idolatry, (2) blasphemy, (3) bloodshed, (4) incest and adultery, and (5) robbery; (6) the injunction to establish courts of law; and (7) the prohibition against eating flesh cut from a living animal. These seven, all of which are given closer definition in respect to their applicability[83]...are regarded as comprising the minimal moral imperatives essential to the maintenance of an ordered and wholesome society.[84]

That there is general agreement on the inclusion of a prohibition against idolatry will be important as we explore Wyschogrod's transformation of these ideas. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that there is no mention of idolatry in the biblical account. The rabbinic derivation of this principle requires some creative readings of other biblical verses.[85] Wyschogrod himself can be said to employ a similarly creative and selective reading.

The Noahide Covenant and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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[82] *Hilchot Melakhim*, 10:6.

[83] See esp. BT Hulin 92a, Sanhedrin 56a-60a, and Maimonides, *Hilchot Melakhim* 9:2ff.

[84] Sarna, 377.

[85] See, e.g., BT Sanhedrin 56b and the rabbis use of Gen 2:16 to derive the Noahide laws.

We turn now to Wyschogrod's treatment of non-Jews, particularly Christians, based on the scriptural-rabbinic foundation of the Noahide Covenant. Of course, to call it a "covenant" already assumes a great deal about the nature of Genesis 9 and the rabbinic interpretation of it.

In reading the Noahide episode of Genesis 9, Wyschogrod takes certain rabbinic principles for granted while leaving others aside. One statement is particularly telling in this regard: "Non-Jews are required to adhere to the so-called Noachide commandments based on Genesis 9:1-7..."[86] If we listen to the silence, we notice that he fails to mention that the concept of Noahide commandments and the notion of their obligation upon gentiles more immediately emerges from rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 9:1-7, such as the Sanhedrin texts elucidated above. To this challenge he would probably respond: Yes, but the authoritative nature of the rabbi's interpretation is based on the Torah's account of the Noahide revelation. Furthermore, he would add, "to say that the Noahide commandments are totally a rabbinic invention is, I think, wrong. While I grant you that the number seven is not exactly prominent in the Bible, the fact remains that the rabbis hooked onto some text in the Noah story that lends itself to this kind of interpretation."[87] The rabbis are justified, in his view, because their interpretation remains faithful to the Torah.

Wyschogrod locates his prooftext for Jewish recognition of non-Jews and their faiths -- particularly Christianity -- in the Noah episode, in particular God's speech to Noah and his sons after the flood. Though he finds inspiration and even necessary precedent in the rabbinic tradition's interpretation of this passage in the Torah, Wyschogrod's concern is not

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[86] *Abraham's Promise,* 158.

[87] Unpublished interview.

entirely halakhic. In fact, he believes that Orthodoxy spends too much time talking about halakhah. In his words:

> I would be happier if the word used was *Torah* and not *halakhah*. The Bible is a complex book and is not only and perhaps not even primarily a code of law; it's a narrative. The narrative element is crucial. It intersperses, combines narrative and law. I think that's a very unusual and important fact.[88]

This composite perspective on the Torah provides the foundation for Wyschogrod's unique rendition of the Noahide Covenant. He derives his theological conclusions from a combination of selective engagement with rabbinic tradition and a rather more weighty reading of the Torah itself.

Having devoted a great deal of attention to the problem of Wyschogrod's attitude toward rabbinic authority and law, let us consider now Wyschogrod's definition of the Noahide commandments. His most striking statement in this regard is, "The Noachide Law is...the Torah of the gentiles."[89] This statement is emblematic of Wyschogrod's approach and in some ways echoes the rabbinic approach. By calling the Noahide Law the gentiles' Torah, he means that gentiles are obligated to observe those laws on the same authority -- the God of Israel -- upon which Jews are obligated to observe the Torah. Borrowing from Maimonides, Wyschogrod notes that a "gentile who obeys the Noachide Law pleases God and has a portion in the world to come."[90] In Rambam's codification of the Noahide laws, one who observes the laws out of reason and not out of faith in God gains no merit.[91] Similarly, Wyschogrod acknowledges that the only way for gentiles to learn of this revelation is through

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[88] Unpublished interview.

[89] *Abraham's Promise,* 190.

[90] Ibid.

[91] *Hilchot Melachim,* 8:11.

engagement with Jews and Jewish scripture, and not through reason alone. We will pick up this thread again further below.

The question of authority is central to our understanding Wyschogrod's theology of Noahides. It is God's revelation to Noah and his sons upon which the Noahide commandment's authority ultimately rests. Wyschogrod is less interested in the various rabbinic permutations of those laws than in the very fact of their revelation to *bnei Noach*. There is some common sense to this lack of interest, since there is no rabbinic consensus around the specific legal content of the Noahide revelation, as mentioned above. At any rate, the Noahide laws as they apply to gentiles rest on the authority of the God of Israel. Wyschogrod rejects that they are identical to natural law, achievable by reason alone. In this regard, he shows himself to be a non-rationalist despite a certain limited area of agreement with Maimonides.

Two qualifications are necessary for gentiles to be in right relationship with the God of Israel. The first involves their appreciation that the Noahide laws -- the terms of their participation in Israel's covenant -- descend from God's freely chosen command. It is God's authority, and not that of any secular polity or reasoned argument, that legitimizes these laws. On this point, Wyschogrod shares Maimonides' dismissive attitude toward moral atheists.

Second, gentiles must embrace the People of Israel as a natural corollary to their embrace of the God of Israel. Here we find echoes of Wyschogrod's interpretation of the Shema and it implications for Jews, gentiles, and God.

> There is no way to God except through the Jewish people... It is through this people that the story of Noah's covenant has been preserved. The story of Noah is part of the Torah and the Torah is not a book that can be separated from the Jewish people, as if

> it had a life of its own on the shelves of libraries and secondhand bookstores. The Jewish people is the carrier of the Torah as a people in whose life it is embodied.[92]

Gentiles who seek entry into relationship with the God of Israel cannot do so by spirit or intellect alone. They must accept the embodied and narratively revealed account of God's covenant with Israel, which entails accepting the people Israel along with it.

Nowhere else is the influence of Nostra Aetate and Wyschogrod's dialogue with Catholics more evident than in this concept. Having fled Berlin as a child in 1939, Wyschogrod knows the dark history of a Christendom that rejects Jews while supposing to love the God of the Bible -- that is, the God of Israel. Wyschogrod's appeal to the perpetual divinity of scripture in its legal and narrative components acts as a theological corrective against thousands of years of bad blood between Christians and Jews.

Seen in this light, perhaps Wyschogrod's demotion of rabbinic authority can be thought of as a kind of concession to better Jewish-Christian relations. The strongest basis for interfaith cooperation is a common scripture; by deemphasizing rabbinic literature Wyschogrod reenergizes Jewish scripture. This approach gives him more currency in theological "transactions" with Christians. It frees him, in a way, from some of the rabbinic restrictions on such conversations and relationships. Those restrictions include, most notably, Rav Soloveitchik's 20th-century ruling that Jews may dialogue with Christians on secular matters for the sake of peace, but must avoid discussing matters of religion or theology. Wyschogrod firmly rejects this bifurcation of dialogue, asserting instead that theology is precisely what should occupy our conversations with Christians. It is to this point that we now turn.

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[92] *Abraham's Promise*, 50.

Whether Wyschogrod's theology emerges from his interfaith dialogue or vice versa -- a chicken or egg problem -- need not distract us. What we can demonstrate is the great extent to which his theology and dialogue efforts are interwoven. We can even identify a strain of what might be called "Noahide evangelism."

Noahide Evangelism?

Given that Wyschogrod takes as an article of faith the truth of the Torah, and given that the Torah's truth contains the Noahide commandments, it follows logically that a theology of gentile relationship to Jews and God would emerge. Wyschogrod affirms that an educational task devolves upon Jews because "it is difficult to see where else but from Jews gentiles could obtain information about the Noachide commandments..."[93] If the Noahide laws are the divinely ordained requirement for gentiles to be in right relationship with the God of Israel, then where else but the people and scripture of Israel are gentiles going to learn about this revelation?

An interesting problem arises when we examine Wyschogrod's textual basis for this educational responsibility. Often, Wyschogrod evidences a biblical sensibility in emphasizing the revelation to Noah as a paradigm for gentile relationship with God. However, when it comes down to the details, Wyschogrod uncritically accepts a rabbinic law:

> Non-Jews are required to adhere to the so-called Noachide commandments based on Genesis 9:1-7, *one of which prohibits idolatry*... Since it is difficult to see where else but from Jews gentiles could obtain information about the Noachide commandments, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jews have a responsibility to teach to gentiles the Noachide commandments, *including the prohibition against idolatry*.[94]

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[93] Ibid., 158.

[94] Ibid., 158. The emphasis is mine.

Notice that the Noahide law which Wyschogrod deems central in his work and thought -- the prohibition against idolatry -- does not actually appear in the biblical account of the Noah episode. We can only assume that Wyschogrod has accepted this piece of the rabbinic understanding of Noahide commands, for he gives us no hermeneutical basis for focusing on this law in particular over the other rabbinic derivations. He fails to mention the Noahide laws about capital punishment, courts of law, eating an animal's lifeblood, et al.

What Wyschogrod does offer in the way of reasoning is far from hermeneutical. It is rather a combination of historical and socio-cultural justifications, coupled with a desire to undo damage done to Judaism and Christianity through centuries of antagonism. Idolatry becomes the key issue for Wyschogrod because he believes it to be the key issue dividing Jews and Christians. Specifically, "The natural tendency has been for Jews to view Christianity as a foreign faith whose otherness is nowhere displayed more clearly than in the teachings of the Trinity and the incarnation."[95] These two Christian doctrines are the most challenging to Jews precisely because they border on idolatry. Historically, these doctrines have been a source of tension and mistrust. "The effect," Wyschogrod says,

> has been a kind of polarization. The more Christianity has moved in an incarnational direction, the more Judaism moved in a transcendental direction... In short, there has been a tendency to transform the God of the Bible into the God of the philosophers... [W]e have here a situation in which both faiths have damaged one another.[96]

As we discussed above in the context of overreactive anti-Karaism, here Wyschogrod demonstrates his concern for Judaism's overreaction against Christian doctrine. He worries

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[95] Ibid., 158.

[96] Ibid., 158-59.

that Judaism has damaged itself in its zeal to distance itself from what has long been seen as the Christian mistake.

Wyschogrod's solution to this problem, to which we have already hinted, requires his characteristic mix of unique scriptural interpretation and selectively rabbinic thinking. In addition, there is an unmistakeable emphasis on historical considerations. He believes that times have changed since the darkest ages of Jewish-Christian discord, enabling Jews and Christians to have a positive impact on each other's faiths.

> All things being equal, many Christians today believe that a version of Christianity which reduces the gulf toward Judaism may be preferable and more authentic. In that spirit, dialogue about the Trinity and the incarnation -- the most difficult issues between the two faiths -- may be of advantage to all concerned.[97]

Wyschogrod urges dialogue both to increase understanding between the two faith communities and to minimize doctrinal mistakes made by both faiths in overreacting to the other. Here is another instance of his attempt at offering a theological counterweight to unfortunate intellectual trends.

Theological grounds also undergird Wyschogrod's commitment to dialogue with Christians. He rejects the idea that the gentile nations are not supposed to have their own covenant with the God of Israel. This view, he argues, "ignores the covenant with Noah, which is not natural law but a covenant in its own right." Wyschogrod's absolute faith in the Torah leads him to this belief, which is a kind of covenantal pluralism. Furthermore, it is "incumbent upon Israel to welcome the covenant of the nations with the God of Israel."[98]

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[97] Ibid., 160; see also 164.

[98] Ibid., 186.

Here again we encounter the paradox of Wyschogrod's pluralism: the God of Israel alone is God, but he enters into covenant with all peoples.

Israel's task, therefore, is twofold. First, and more generally, they are to educate the gentiles about the Noahide Commandments to ensure the proper covenantal relationship between gentile peoples and the God of Israel. Second, and more specifically, they are to educate and engage with Christians about the Trinity and incarnation, lest Christians slip into idolatry and violate the very Noahide Covenant[99] which God wants for them and which Jews should teach them.

Conclusion

As we have now seen, Wyschogrod's interpretation of the Noahide Covenant involves a complicated mix of scriptural and rabbinic sources. It would be an exaggeration to say that he is completely unfaithful to the rabbinic voices on the subject. However, once again he demonstrates that his approach is, on balance, tipped more toward biblical interpretation than rabbinic. His attitude toward Jewish law and divine authority, discussed in the first chapter, manifests here. Scripture remains primary; rabbinic commentary provides a gloss. And yet, there seems to be one significant exception to this hermeneutical attitude. When it comes to the specific command against idolatry, on which Wyschogrod constructs his theology of Jewish-Christian dialogue, he rests on a rabbinic interpretation of the Noahide Covenant.

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[99] Once again, let's not ignore that Wyschogrod seems unconcerned with whether Christians adhere to the other Noahide laws. Idolatry seems to be his singular concern, for reasons mentioned above.

This selective and complex approach makes Wyschogrod difficult to pin down intellectually. The labels "Orthodox" and "rabbinic" may not be inclusive enough to characterize him properly. Ultimately, whether he should be included under the umbrella of Orthodoxy is not for me to decide, but for that community's legal and theological arbiters. I would simply note that Wyschogrod's own writing has addressed internal Jewish pluralism, too. In his essay on Jewish unity, and elsewhere in his thought, he affirms the eternal continuity of the Jewish family. "Were Judaism primarily a community of faith," he suggests, "all differences of belief would strike at the foundation of Jewish unity."[100] But Judaism, in his view, is primarily the bodily election of the descendants of Abraham, and only secondarily a community of faith.

His conclusion, I believe, should be read as a striking counterweight against believing Jews' exclusion of nontraditional Jews: "The believing Jew must therefore perceive the sanctity of every Jew."[101] In a typically Wyschogrodian turn, it is precisely his reading of scripture that precipitates his unusually pluralistic embrace of all Jews. It is not hard to imagine that the same strategy of respectful education that characterizes his dialogue with Christians would inform his approach within the Jewish community. Indeed, his work with Reform Rabbis Eugene Borowitz and Michael Signer (z''l), to name only a few, affirms his commitment to Jewish community across lines of theology, denomination, and observance. In the end, Wyschogrod's theology is underpinned by a transcendent hope in Jewish continuity and unity that will glow with divine light. That light, he prays, will spread toward

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[100] *Abraham's Promise*, 51.

[101] Ibid.

a messianic future wherein all peoples will be unified under the worship of the God of Israel and respect for the People of Israel.

CONCLUSION

We have viewed Michael Wyschogrod's thought through several lenses. In his approach to biblical and rabbinic textual authority, we have found him to be an original and nuanced thinker. His acceptance of limited, secondary rabbinic authority is problematic from an Orthodox Jewish perspective. Yet Wyschogrod makes an innovative and compelling case for refusing to let anti-Karaism distort the primary importance of the Torah in Jewish life and thought. Rabbinic reasoning functions as a necessary but secondary source of legal reasoning. Ironically, Wyschogrod affirms the legitimacy of rabbinic interpretation of Torah in his own interpretive acts. He, like the classical rabbis, considers Torah the primary revelation worthy of interpretation. Interpretations are valid, he would assert, as long as they hook onto a biblical prooftext or principle. And he also asserts that the rabbis agree with him.

We have also seen Wyschogrod's counterbalancing approach to Christianity and philosophy's influences on Judaism. In his analysis of the Shema, Wyschogrod warns against over-philosophizing Judaism to the point that God becomes one concept among many within Reason's all-encompassing ontological framework. Instead, taking a cue from Karl Barth, Wyschogrod understands the Shema as a statement of covenantal loyalty between Israel and our God. Extending his "counterweight" approach into the realm of Christianity, he articulates an understanding of exclusive Jewish covenant that enables non-Jewish relationship with God. Through embrace of the Jewish people, Christians can come to embrace and be embraced by the God of Israel. Even the problem of the trinity and the

incarnation, if properly understood, might be reduced to a mere "problem" rather than a theological chasm between the two faiths.

As the Torah defines the terms of Israel's relationship with God, the Noahide Covenant defines the terms of God's relationship with non-Jews. In his understanding of the Noahide laws, Wyschogrod manifests all three aspects of his "counterbalancing" approach. As above, he rejects the distortions of Jewish thought that he believes result from the excessive influence of anti-Christian sentiment and rational philosophy. The Noahide laws cannot be reduced to a matter of universal reason. They are revealed by YHWH for the nations to observe. Therefore, there is room for Christians and other non-Jews to be in right relationship with YHWH, provided they satisfy two basic conditions: they must accept the divine authority of the Noahide laws; and they must accept the Jewish people, whose holy book brings those laws into the world. Wyschogrod shows little concern for the specifics of the rabbinic Noahide commandments, except for the prohibition of idolatry. On this point, he does appear hermeneutically naive, or at least not transparent. His singular focus on idolatry aligns with his interest in delineating the parameters of Christian relationship with Jews and our God. In other words, he insists that trinitarianism does not violate the Noahide command against idolatry, thereby allowing for Christian inclusion in the Noahide Covenant (provided they meet the two criteria just mentioned).

For the liberal Jewish reader, Wyschogrod's appeal is both refreshing and limited. For the liberal theologian, the case for religious pluralism is easier. One can resort to theories such as subjective revelation[102] to argue that each religious community creates its own

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[102] See Appendix B.

culturally contingent interpretation of the one God or, for the less theistically inclined, the Real. According to this line of thinking, historical, sociological, and linguistic differences separate faith systems from each other; their ultimate ends are the same. Much of the literary output of this type speaks in compelling and visionary ways about the peaceful cooperation of world religions, united in common purpose to serve the one Divine Reality we each call by different names.

Wyschogrod is interesting and provocative precisely because he is *not* this type of liberal religious pluralist. His notion of religious pluralism, if it can even properly be called that, rests on his utterly particularistic affirmation of the Sinaitic revelation. The Jews possess the Torah; it is the true document of the relationship between Israel and YHWH. And yet, coupled with this exclusivist premise, Wyschogrod's thought entails a surprisingly pluralistic and paradoxical corollary. Precisely because the Bible is true, we can derive from its Noah episode an understanding of God's will for non-Jews. Inherent to Wyschogrod's Torah-true Judaism, then, is a belief that God enters into relationship with other peoples.

In a sense, this basic idea of entering into relationship seems to guide Wyschogrod's life. In the tradition of *imitatio dei*, Wyschogrod has devoted his efforts to building relationships with Christians. He pursues these connections both to deepen his understanding of both faiths and to bring Judaism's view of Christians and Christianity into better balance. This commitment arises precisely *because* of his traditional faith, not in spite of it.

Of course, there is much still left unsaid and unexamined in Wyschogrod's thought. One compelling area worth further study is the problem of extending his theology to encompass non-Christian gentiles. The commonality of scriptures facilitates mutuality

between Jews and Christians. Similarly, that Christians already consider their God to be the God of Israel and the God of the Bible makes dialogue and understanding possible and potentially fruitful. In contrast, relationship with other faiths is more problematic. As Wyschogrod said, "Our relationship with Islam is much worse than Christianity because we have no common scripture, so I cannot when talking to a Muslim quote Bible."[103] It is more difficult to convince a Muslim of the truth of the Noahide Covenant, for example, when her scripture does not contain Genesis 9.

There is an assumption at work here that we should bring to light: Wyschogrod's theory of Noahide relationship demands deep engagement with the practitioners and believers of other faiths. Without engagement, there is no opportunity for Jews to teach them about Noahide laws, nor for them to put their faith to the Noahide test. Without a common scripture, which is akin to a common theological language, theological dialogue is a major challenge. This point raises an additional aspect of the problem of foreign scriptures: that is, totally foreign theological systems. Wyschogrod says, "Now, when you go to other religions -- Buddhism, Hinduism, stuff like that -- that's just not my expertise... I do not have a developed theology of Buddhism, from a Jewish standpoint."[104] Within this casual comment lies an important truth. In order to reach an understanding of a Jewish view of another faith, one must engage deeply with the people and scriptures of that faith. What can be said in general of other faiths is limited to the Noahide Covenant and its terms. What can be said of the Jewish view of other faiths must be directed toward specific faiths, not some abstract Other. Perhaps this point sounds like a truism, but I believe it to be a profound lesson of

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[103] Unpublished interview.

[104] Ibid.

Wyschogrod's thought and life. Theology is not merely the exercise of the mind about ideas. It is a record of the encounter with God and others, and the thoughtful reflection that results. Wyschogrod's thought is fundamentally a relational, humanizing theology. Each Jew and every non-Jew stands in potential relationship with God and with each other. Although Wyschogrod may not give us all the answers to bring world religions into harmony, he does offer us that elusive human necessity, hope. That hope lives in the paradox of Wyschogrod's thought: God has truly chosen the Jews to be his elect; and God truly desires that non-Jews live in relationship with him and with the Jewish People.

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APPENDIX A

(Unpublished) Interview with Michael Wyschogrod
Conducted and Transcribed by David Jeremy Segal
November 26, 2009

DS: With this interesting issue that you respond to in the 2nd edition of *Body of Faith* --

MW: Yes, the preface.

DS: You talk about this criticism about whether you're too biblical and not rabbinic enough. I'm curious, this concept of the Noahide covenant -- that it has specific legal content seems to be a rabbinic innovation. I'm curious about your attitude about that and whether you think there's an obligation that goes along with that, how much you base that in the biblical version and how much in Talmudic, maybe Maimonidean, and other elaborations.

MW: Number 1, to say that the Noahide commandments are totally a rabbinic invention is, I think, wrong. While I grant you that number 7 is not exactly prominent in the Bible, the fact remains that the rabbis hooked onto some text in the Noah story that lends itself to this kind of interpretation. Particularly when you take into account that Noah is pre-Abrahamic and therefore is not a Jew in that sense. So I am not a Karaite, which means that I am loyal to rabbinic Judaism, though I keep in mind the levels of authority. I think the authority of scripture -- and I don't think this is particularly controversial, and certainly the rabbis would see it that way -- if a Talmudic rabbi wants to prove something, the best thing he can do is quote a verse, and that settles the issue. Now it is true that there are different ways of interpreting the verse, and that's inevitable, but the ancient rabbis do not see themselves as inventing a new religion and ignoring Scripture -- that is totally wrong. Though, partly in response to the Karaites, and partly due to other reasons, at times it almost appears in the writings of some people that the rabbis are more important than Scripture. But I think that's wrong. I don't know any rabbi who would take that position. When they interpret they interpret under the presupposition that Scripture is ultimately authoritative. One other point: in the case of scripture, we have an established text that is very difficult to monkey around with -- you can say "this verse came from Sumerian culture and we don't need to pay attention to it". If it's in scripture it is all authoritative. But the rabbis see themselves as interpreting scripture. We do not have an established canonical rabbinic text. Even the Mishnah, and certainly not the Gemara. There's such a thing as a pasul sefer Torah - one that can't be used because it has a mistake, an extra letter. If it does, you can't use it in temple worship; you have to fix it, and it can be fixed. There is no such thing as a pasul Mishnah. There are different mishnaic and talmudic texts; the Gaon of Vilna makes corrections as mistakes of scribes, but he would never do that to scripture. I will admit I am a bit more scriptural than many other Jewish thinkers.

DS: It reminds me of a yeshiva joke: “what’s the Tanakh? It’s a collection of quotes from rabbinic literature --”

MW: “--from the Talmud,” yes. Or if you ask a Talmudist about a pasuk, where is it from, he says, “Berachot Daf Yud-Beis, Amud Aleph.” Because it’s quoted there, and he doesn’t think of it as being scripture, but in Masechet Brachot! This is a joke of course, but there’s some element of truth in that. Going back into Talmudic times, the requirement that you’re supposed to spend 1/3rd of time on Mikra, 1/3rd on Midrash and I forget the 3rd 1/3rd... This is unfortunately not what is done in yeshivot. No yeshiva spends 1/3rd of it’s time on Tanakh. Should they, I don’t know. But they should spend more time than they do.

It is true, and partly I act as a counterweight to this, that in some circles, Judaism has been identified with rabbinic thought and not scripture, and I want to even the balance a little bit. A concrete example: when we light Chanukah candles, we say *asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav vitzivanu lhadlik ner shel Chanukah*. The truth is, God never said that in scripture, because there is no Chanukah book in Jewish canon (there is Maccabees, but extra-canonical). Same on Purim, we make a brachah with *asher kidshanu b’mitzvosav*. The rabbis say, since the rabbis were given the authority, a takanah issued by the rabbis has the authority of divine command, even though it is a humanly... This bothers me a little bit -- doesn’t ruin my sleep -- I think it would have been better if *asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav* were limited to biblical commandments and not used for non-biblical commandments as well. Again, I think part of this is the reaction to the Karaites. The more the Karaites went into the anti-rabbinite direction, the more the rabbis went the other direction. Very similar to Reform Judaism: the more RJ went away from halakhah, Orthodoxy got more and more frozen in halakhah. It’s kind of a dance of death of each side holding on to its position and getting more and more extreme in response to the other guys.

DS: It sounds also like your view of how Judaism and Christianity have parted ways, especially around incarnation.

MW: Right, “that’s a Christian thing and we don’t deal with it, it’s wrong.” So there is this tendency to mutually drive each other crazy, if I could put it that way. If you say to me that the rabbis are not important -- let’s say you’re a Karaite -- you say the rabbis are just a lot of bologna and I say, “‘the rabbis are a lot of bologna’?!? They’re even more important than Scripture!” So you say, “More important than Scripture?!? No they’re not!” It’s psychologically understandable. They more you knock my position, the more I build it up and make it even more extreme. We’ve got to be careful, in particular Orthodox Jews, not to let Reform Judaism drive them into halakhic extremism. Nowadays you hear a lot of talk about halakhah. I would be happier if the word used was Torah and not halakhah. The Bible is a complex book and is not only and perhaps not even primarily a code of law: it’s a narrative. The narrative element is crucial. It intersperses, combines narrative and law. I think that’s a very unusual and important fact.

DS: That leads to another question about aggada and halakhah, and your own explicit or implicit use of rabbinic text in your thought. I haven't read everything you've written yet, but...

MW: Have you seen the Meir Soloveitchik article in *First Things*? Here is the journal.

DS: Excellent, thank you...
...
DS: What has there been in the way of Orthodox responses to what you've said?

MW: Read David Berger's introduction, he's mainline Orthodox. Read what he thinks of my work -- even if it were half true it would be very nice! There is the review that appeared in *Commentary*, have you seen those? They were quite critical. One in Commentary and one in *Azure*. For some reason these guys don't like me -- the Shalem Center. They very negative reviews of *Abraham's Promise*. *Commentary* is mad at me going back to the beginning even before Podhoretz's editorship. Title is: "My *Commentary* Problem and Ours." Goes back quite a few years. Steve Schwartzchild was editor at the time. HUC must have back copies of those.

DS: There was also a review in *Modern Theology* of *Abraham's Promise*...
...
DS: Much of your writing focuses on the Jewish view of Christianity and the relationship between, and you mention Islam sometimes parenthetically, so I'm curious in cases where there isn't that common scriptural foundation: in general how does your theology make room for the validity of other faiths? And, more specifically, does your sense of the Noahide covenant extend beyond Christians, and what are the parameters?

MW: Well certainly the Noahide Covenant extends way beyond Christianity: it applies to all non-Jews, Christian or anything else. That's not a problem. You are perfectly right in saying that the unique nature between J and C is the common Scripture. Even though it is only partially common, obviously -- the Christians add to it the NT that we do not accept as Scripture, and they interpret the OT slightly differently than we do. But the interesting thing is that if you compare the J-C and J-M relationship, I think you will find that in one respect our relationship with Islam is closer and better, and in another sense it's much worse. It's much better in the sense that there is no trinitarian issue with Islam; from the Jewish point of view it is not idol-worship by any means, and therefore our relationship with Islam is much more comfortable because we don't have this 10-ton elephant sitting in the room called the Trinity. On the other hand, our relationship with Islam is much worse than Christianity because we have no common scripture, so I cannot when talking to a Muslim quote Bible. To a Christian - a believing Christian - I can quote the Bible. For example: the other day, Barbara Walters asked Sarah Palin what she thinks of Obama's attitude to Jewish settlement on the West Bank, etc. And she came out more pro-settlement than 98% of Jews! Jews have a right to live anywhere they want, what kind of discrimination is this, Arabs live in Israel so

why chase Jews out of West Bank? What is behind this -- it's her evangelical Christianity. The Bible says God gave the land of Israel to the Jews. End of discussion. That's what the Bible says! Therefore, as a believing evangelical Christian, she has to respect that. I've always wondered with President Carter, who also claims to be evang Christian, apparently it's had zero influence on his views on Israel and the Arab issue? To my knowledge, no one has confronted him on this issue and said, you're not supposed to talk like that, you're supposed to pay some attention to what the Bible says about the Jews in the land of Israel. To come back to the Jewish-Muslim relationship: in one way, it is much easier, and in other ways much harder. Someone wrote recently: In spite of the difficulties we have with Christianity and Trinity, the amount of literature available over the ages about J-C relations is infinitely greater than the amount available on Jewish-Muslim relations. In the medieval period, there is a great deal of material. Me'iri, one of the medieval commentators -- very positive on Christianity. The answer is, because as important as irritating as the Trinity is, even such a major problem can be overcome as long as we have a common scripture. Not that the problem is small or unimportant -- it is important -- but, it is outweighed by the common scripture element. So that much about the J-C-M relationship, and that's why I've written very little about Muslim relations. I used to attend something at Georgetown called Trialogue. It never took off because a Muslim would appear once or twice and never show his face again -- they were scared. Their lives are in danger! They start messing around with Jews, especially if they say anything positive about Judaism, they can pay heavily for it. Now, when you go to other religions -- Buddhism, Hinduism, stuff like that -- that's just not my expertise. There used to be a joke: they went up to a Jew in a synagogue and asked him, "Cohen, Levi, Yisroel?" His answer, "Coyma Yisroel," barely a Yisraelite. I am barely an expert in Judaism and Christianity, and not at all in Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. I do not have a developed theology of Buddhism, from a Jewish standpoint.

DS: What I'm hearing behind what you're saying, and maybe it's obvious, but worth stating -- to develop a theology of another faith actually requires deep engagement with that faith.

MW: That's correct.

DS: I don't think that's necessarily true for everyone who is interested in commenting on other faiths.

MW: Ignorance is never good. Those kids who reviewed *Abraham's Promise* -- two young people -- they didn't know the material and certainly could use a bit more humility. When you make statements about another faith, and you are basically ignorant of it, I don't think that's a good thing.

DS: Question about use of terms: in several of the articles I've been reading, you refer to the "non-election" of Christians. I'm wondering what you think about the term "non-election" as opposed to "different" or "differently" elected.

MW: I think that's a little, trying to manipulate... We're all elect -- I'm elect, you're elect, the janitor's elect, the policeman is elect!

DS: That's the caricature of the liberal position.

MW: Yes. If we're all elect, then none of us is elect. Christianity can be very good and very bad. But at the end of the day, Christians are not Jews, and not elect. Now there is a state of non-election which is not all that far from election. In other words, if you're elect and I'm not, and I fight this, then this is bad, because God elected you and not me, and I should humbly accept God's decision that I am not elect and you are. The form of Christianity which in humility accepts the election of Israel, and does not push Christian election ahead of or equal to the election of Israel -- that kind of C is not all that far from election. There are Christians now, and I have met some of them, there are not billions but some, particularly in the evangelical world, for whom the election of Israel is not only something they can accept but part of their worldview, it's fundamental. There are some Christian groups in Israel who never buy Israeli real estate, they only rent, because they don't believe they have any right to own any part of the Land of Israel. They can rent, yes, if a Jew owns it and rents it to them. It's breathtaking... I remember a Soviet UN delegate Yakov Malik, to the security council. Occasionally, without being a member of security council, they'll invite the Israeli delegate to sit at the table. Every time the Israeli representative spoke, Malik would follow him with some remarks to the effect of, "We have just heard the point of view of the representative of the Chosen People." Venom and hatred of this concept of the chosen people, which of course is true of Nazism. Sturmer often used sarcastically and ironically this expression of The Chosen People. The idea can generate huge hostility, and it has over the centuries. But then in smaller numbers of people it generates an obedient love of the Jewish people. If God chose the Jews, then if I love them, then I am loving God, because I am loving someone whom God chose. I think that's amazing. You never hear that in Muslim circles, to my knowledge, nor do you hear it in liberal Christian circles.

DS: I'm taking a class on the Qur'an now, and the teacher argues that the Qur'an sees itself as a corrective, and that maybe poses a different kind of problem for Jewish-Muslim dialogue, because it talks about Jews and Christians as people who had revelation, but strayed--

MW: --messed it up, yes. And that the Bible, including the NT, is full of distortions by the Jews, like the idea of election and stuff like that. That's why there's no point in quoting scripture to a Muslim, because he'll say this Scripture you're quoting is full of lies and deception. On the other hand, sometimes they say nice things about the Bible, but not too often. Mostly the Bible is more full of lies than anything else.

DS: A practical manifestation of some of these issues. Obviously you've done a lot of Jewish-Christian dialogue in person. I'm curious if you attend a Catholic Mass, or other services, and if so or if not how you respond to the halakhah around that.

MW: I did maybe 2 or 3 times in my whole life attend a mass. I don't do it anymore, and it doesn't make me comfortable. I don't think Jews belong there. So that's the answer. I did do it, and I repent [laughs].

DS: In Michael Walzer's volume of *Jewish Political Tradition*, there's a section on gentiles. He includes excerpts from Sanhedrin 56-59, Maimonides on that, and an interesting passage from recently published Elijah Benamozegh (*Israel and Humanity*). His idea is advocating a separate Noahide religion to urge your non-Jewish neighbors to convert to. Have you encountered that, and what do you think?

MW: I haven't read this particular author, but I have a file somewhere on the Noahides. I know there are Noahides, some of whom take guidance from a rabbi. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, at one time, was very into the Noahide thing, and sent his shluchim out (later on he sent them only to Jews) to gentiles for a period to make them Noahides. It wasn't particularly successful and I think he lost interest or gave it up. I think that the Noahide Laws are good for non-Jews. As Jews, we should do everything in our power to enlighten them and tell them about the Noahide commandments. The really interesting question is whether the Noahide view can be combined with Christianity. That's where the Trinity and stuff comes in. Not easy, requires a bit of doing. There is a book called *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* (Mark Kinzer). Do you have any questions about Jewish Christianity, Jesus-believing Jews?

DS: The letter to the Cardinal deals with that issue.

MW: There is this group now, one of them is headed by someone with a PhD from University of Michigan I think, and they are sort of moving towards a halakhic Jewish Christianity. On the one hand they have a strong tie to Jesus, on the other hand they aren't willing to give up halakhah

DS: Do they consider themselves ethnically Jewish?

MW: Yes they do, and they are very hurt that the Jewish community... I remember being at a conference in Berlin where the issue was...
[break for phone call]
MW: UAHC with this humanistic/atheist congregation which was later rejected, but that hadn't happened yet. This rabbi was in Berlin -- a rabbi from LA? -- he gave a talk in which he said they should be admitted. They say they're Jews, their theological opinions are their business, and they should be admitted. So then somebody got up and said, how about a Jesus-believing congregation? He said, NO WAY, ABSOLUTELY NO WAY, WOULDN'T ADMIT THEM EVEN FOR 10 SECONDS. THE MOMENT YOU BELIEVE IN JESUS YOU STOP BEING A JEW AND YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS APPLYING TO THE UAHC. I have just recently had occasion to meet an Israeli posek, Israeli rabbinate right-wing, and I said to him, what is better: a Jew who believes in Jesus and doesn't practice the

mitzvot; or a Jew who believes in Jesus but in addition also practices Shabbat, kashrut, pesach, etc? Without a second's hesitation, he said, "The second." Because each thing is separate. If I believe in Jesus -- this has to be unpacked -- if I believe Jesus is divine, that's a bad thing. But it I believe Jesus is divine and eat pork, that's worse than if I believe he's divine but not eat pork. So at least you are obeying the mitzvah not to eat chazir, or not to make fire on shabbat, or whatever is involved. That's been my attitude toward Jewish Christians. I have tried to m'kareiv them to Torah and mitzvot.

I don't know if you've heard of this, but there is a medieval document that claims that Paul the Apostle was an agent of the rabbis to infiltrate the Jesus movement and push it away from halakhah because that way everybody would know that they are not Jews. Whereas if they kept observances, it would confuse too many people and might even attract some. Now, historically speaking I am quite sure that this has never happened, but the very fact that such a myth was invented is interesting, in that if the Jesus-believing community had stopped appealing to gentiles or never started, it would have remained a branch of Judaism with a disagreement. But since they were so eager to I guess, maybe they got paid on the basis of numbers, and the number of Jewish converts was not very great, so they went for the gentiles, but that had it's own problems. Very soon the church became a gentile operation.

What do you think of the Lustiger letter? Does it make sense to you?

DS: It does. There's a consistency to it that really challenged me. In Reform Judaism especially, we're a little bit fuzzy about how we define who a Jew is. The ethnic element, we haven't rejected it altogether, but I think we're sensitive about it.

MW: Liberal Jews, the one thing they know is Judaism is NO JESUS. That's what Judaism is: We don't believe in Jesus. Everything else is secondary. If you come in and say you believe in Jesus and you want to be a Jew, that's totally impossible. That's like a square circle. You cannot be a square that is circular. I think you can't define Judaism as NO TO JESUS. There is a NO to Jesus, but it's not the essence of Judaism.

DS: That speaks to the move that initiated with 19th century Reform, which was to say Judaism is a religion, period. I still think that bears a heavy influence on liberal Jews today, who probably would look at this idea of a born Jewish convert to Christianity practicing Judaism and being a Christian as something that just doesn't fit in most Jews' intellectual framework for Judaism.

MW: Not that Orthodox Jews jump with joy when they meet a Jesus-believing Jew. At least for the Orthodox, there is more to Judaism and a NO to Jesus. And that's important.

DS: Did you ever get a response?

MW: No, he never did answer me. When Modern Theology printed my letter, it's not addressed to Lustiger. His secretary wrote to Modern Theology not to print it as addressed to him, and I agreed to that. Intellectually, it makes as much sense with any Christian. It's more

interesting with Lustiger who was a Cardinal, but his case is not different from any Jesus-believing Jew. Why he didn't answer, I think he couldn't refute it. He didn't know how to say that there's something wrong with Wyschogrod's reasoning -- I think he found nothing wrong with it! But he was not interested in starting to put on tefillin. Now I have asked many Catholic theologians, could the Church have lived with a Cardinal who was putting on tefillin in the morning, and following the kashrut laws, and not eating chometz on Pesach -- what do you think? Do you think the Church would have kicked him out?

DS: That's my gut reaction.

MW: Every Catholic I asked that question said no, they would not have kicked him out. I've never yet heard one Catholic -- Jews all say yes, absolutely, immediately, they would have kicked him out so hard he wouldn't know what hit him! But the Catholics don't say that.

DS: A question that arose for me from that: isn't there a conflict between accepting the yoke of the mitzvot, and continuing to worship Jesus.

MW: Sure there is, but there's also a conflict between continuing observance of the mitzvot and being nasty to people. There are a lot of people who are nasty to people who are Orthodox Jews. So people are complicated, and the same person who on Monday does a good thing, on Tuesday would do a bad thing. So sure there is a conflict. Because what is at stake here is the Catholic or Christian relationship to Scripture. Scripture says, Don't eat leavened bread on Passover. Now is that relevant to you as a Catholic or isn't it? And that raises the whole issue.

DS: It also raises the question, to what extent do they give credence to rabbinic elaboration of those rituals and rules.

MW: Right, that's another issue. I can imagine some Jewish Catholics, OK, I will observe the biblical commandments, but don't bother me with the rabbinic ones....

This book is very interesting because it really tries to shape a Jesus-believing Jewish point of view that does not want to destroy Jewish identity when a Jew becomes a Jesus-believer. You know there are in Israel such congregations now, that are basically quite halakhic and at the same time Jesus-believing. Give me a couple minutes to find it...

...

DS: I would love to be in touch again soon, if only by phone, when I have further questions. This has been really interesting and helpful to me, and I thank you.

MW: And your goal is a career in the rabbinate?

DS: Yes at this stage...

MW: Don’t you get assigned to temples? Where were you active?

DS: Bates College Hillel, Princeton University (both HHD); two years ago I was the monthly rabbi at a tiny synagogue in Uniontown, PA... This year and last year I’ve been at a 400-family Reform synagogue in Mahwah NJ in Bergen County...
...
To be continued...

MW: I’m glad you came.

APPENDIX B

David Segal
Modern Jewish Thought: Belief Paper
Dr. Eugene Borowitz
Ms. Jill Cozen-Harel
May 15, 2008

Pluralism in Contemporary Jewish Theology

Introduction

Although living among foreign faiths is nothing new for Jews, discussing religious diversity in systematic theological language emerged as a medieval and modern phenomenon. Maimonides and Saadiah Gaon discussed the potential truths of Muslim philosophy. From Moses Mendelssohn to Abraham Joshua Heschel, many Jewish thinkers have addressed the question of how Jews are to understand Christianity and Christian truth claims. In recent years, with globalization and multiculturalism ascendant, the conversation has broadened to include non-Abrahamic religions.

The guiding question of this essay is whether it is legitimate and consistent to be a committed Jew while simultaneously affirming the possibility of truth within other religious systems. In fewer words, can one reasonably be a Jew and a religious pluralist? We will consider several recent Jewish thinkers' approaches to this question, followed by an original exploration of the topic. Each thinker examines revelation and truth in articulating his vision of pluralism. It is worth noting at this stage that the four scholars discussed herein all write in support of pluralism. I believe there is less written on the opposing side because monopolists (i.e., opponents of pluralism) do not feel the need to engage the question of pluralism. They are content in their particular faith and may try either to convince others of

it through proselytization or to explain it to their coreligionists. At any rate, the burden of proof appears to rest firmly on the pluralists, and so we proceed with them.

Recent Jewish defenses of pluralism fall into two categories. First, what may best be called a theory of *Subjective Revelation* arises from a belief in the elusiveness or non-existence of absolute truth coupled with the inevitable contingency of religious opinions._On this view, no religious system encompasses absolute truth. Second, a theory of *Multiple Revelation* defends Judaism's unique truth while also affirming the possibility that truth may reside elsewhere. On this view, God's having spoken to the Jews does not preclude God's speaking to other peoples, even in an entirely distinct way.

We will explore two thinkers in each category: in the former, Raphael Jospe and Dan Cohn-Sherbok; in the latter, Michael Kogan and Michael Wyschogrod. We will conclude with some original thinking on the question of Judaism and Pluralism.

Subjective Revelation

Pluralism without Relativism. Raphael Jospe, in a 2007 online journal, defends a certain Jewish concept of being the chosen people as compatible with religious pluralism. He argues that claims to absolute truth are both theoretically meaningless and morally dangerous. Because of the transcendent nature of truth and the finitude human knowledge, pluralism is the only acceptable religious and philosophical framework. He brings to bear on the discussion both a sweeping sense of Jewish intellectual history and a proficiency with relevant Western philosophical concepts and categories.

To frame the discussion, Jospe identifies and reverses a traditional claim about truth and religion.

> Instead of *spiritual exclusivity* (the notion that there is only one truth, and that one group has exclusive possession of the truth, and thus of the keys to salvation...), which logically leads to *ritual inclusivity* (the impulse to proselytize and include others in one's own religious community with its ritual obligations), we should attempt to work for *spiritual inclusivity* (recognition that different groups are capable of understanding the truth, albeit frequently in diverse ways), which logically leads to *ritual exclusivity* (or pluralism, namely that the existence of different religious approaches and ritual practices is both legitimate and desirable, and that there is no reason to seek to proselytize others).[105]

Jospe's reversal of traditional absolutism lets relativism get its foot in the door. However, he differentiates between "moral relativism" and "epistemological relativism": the former entails practical dangers while the latter rarely does.[106] He rightly acknowledges that pluralism requires some degree of epistemological relativism. For example, the Noahide laws represent for Jospe a Jewish precedent for accepting an impressive range of theological diversity within the moral bounds. Non-Jews may believe and practice in ways unrecognizable to those of us within the Sinai revelation, but as long as they behave morally, Jospe considers their religion legitimate.

Jospe surveys Jewish and Western intellectual history for sources to support his thesis that truth resides in multiple manifestations of revelation. In his view, no system has a monopoly on truth. "On the face of it, revelation would appear to preclude pluralism. The rabbis, however, understood the revelation at Sinai to be adjusted to the subjective capacity of each person, and to the relative cultures of the seventy nations of the world."[107] Jospe

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[105] Jospe, 93; emphasis added.

[106] Ibid., 99.

[107] Ibid., 101.

brings Saadiah Gaon, ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and other Sephardic and Arab Jewish philosophers to show Jewish support for the idea that

> the language of religion is mythological. In such language, which is a function of imagination, not of reason, we have the possibility of multiple images, reflections or imitations of reality, once again raising the possibility of religious pluralism.[108]

Precisely by allegorizing religious truth claims -- much like Maimonides' approach to anthropomorphic language in the Bible -- Jospe allows for multiple religious systems to coexist.

Werner Heisenberg makes an unlikely appearance at the conclusion of Jospe's article to drive the last "nail in the coffin of absolutist epistemology"[109] and complement Jospe's thesis about religious subjectivity with a philosophical corollary. According to Heisenberg's theory of physics, everything we think we know about the world and reality is a synthetic construction and, therefore, inextricably subjective. Religious truths, like all truths, fall into this category and lose their status as absolutes. Fundamental uncertainty leads not to the total rejection of every religious system, but rather to the thoughtful embrace of a particular system's subjective interpretation of revelation, as well as an understanding that truth also finds expression in other systems. This approach "does not imply a strong relativistic conception of multiple truths, but of multiple perspectives on the truth."[110]

Holding up the Noahide laws as an early Jewish example of pluralism, Jospe falls into a common pluralist's trap. While admitting epistemological relativism, Jospe rejects moral relativism. Thus, he proceeds down the slippery slope of rejecting absolutism while still

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[108] Ibid., 103.

[109] Ibid., 110.

[110] Ibid., 113.

holding fast to his own set of what amount to moral absolutes. The best he offers us by way of justification is part pragmatism, part theology: that spiritual exclusivity threatens world peace, stifles cooperation, affronts human dignity, and desecrates God's name. Jospe does not justify his particular set of moral convictions. If we are to understand them as self-evident, then what standard does Jospe offer us to respond to a devout religious believer who does not share those moral convictions? It seems that pluralism must retain some sense of convictions -- if not outright absolutes -- to keep from slipping completely down the slope toward relativism, or nihilism. I will return to this issue below.

Theocentric Judaism. Also in the Subjective Revelation camp, Dan Cohn-Sherbok advocates for a Copernican Revolution in religion. Such a paradigm shift would reorient Judaism such that the Divine, and not Judaism itself, were at the center of Jews' religious outlook. "On this basis the world's religions should be understood as different human responses to the one Divine Reality."[111]

Two visual images illustrate Cohn-Sherbok's Copernican model. In one, the Divine rests as a mysterious cloud atop a mountain; many paths lead to the top, each representing different legitimate religious quests for God. In the second, a Venn diagram, the Divine's circle occupies the center with other religions overlapping but not wholly encompassing it.[112] These metaphors illustrate Cohn-Sherbok's underlying principle of "the inevitable subjectivity of beliefs about the Real."[113]

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[111] Cohn-Sherbok (2005), 125.

[112] For visuals of these diagrams, see Cohn-Sherbok (1994), 158-59.

[113] Cohn-Sherbok (2005), 129.

Jewish textual resources substantiate Cohn-Sherbok's argument. From biblical, rabbinic, and Jewish philosophical sources, he suggests that Judaism has long held that anthropomorphic images of God are merely analogues to help us understand how the Divine works in the world.[114] They are not statements about God's essential Being. Rather, the "doctrines of Judaism must be regarded as human images constructed from within particular social and cultural contexts," even the "absolute claims about God as found in biblical and rabbinic literature..."[115] Indeed, "this sacred literature has particular meaning -- yet it should not be regarded as possessing ultimate truth."[116]

Cohn-Sherbok's most striking defense of pluralism embraces a strong religious relativism. In his words,

> Judaism, like all other major world religions, is built around its own distinctive way of thinking and experiencing the Divine, yet in the end Jewish pluralists must remain agnostic about the correctness of their own religious convictions.[117]

Such a statement places Cohn-Sherbok at the more radical end of the spectrum of Jewish pluralist thinkers. The thoughtful reader wonders, *what then is the value of being Jewish, if it is simply one system of contingent images among many?* Cohn-Sherbok might turn to Mordecai Kaplan's notion of "God as the power that makes for salvation" to answer this challenge. For Kaplan, ritual and community, regardless of the pervasive subjectivity inherent in their particularity, have the power to bring meaning and fulfillment to people's

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[114] Ibid., 126-28.

[115] Ibid., 128.

[116] Ibid., 130. Similarly, Cohn-Sherbok argues that, in light of the pluralistic understanding of Reality's unknowability, central Jewish tenets -- such as the doctrine of the chosen people, the Messiah, and the afterlife -- must necessarily be subjective Jewish responses to experience and context.

[117] Cohn-Sherbok (2005), 131.

lives. However, Cohn-Sherbok offers us no justification for accepting Judaism over any other religious system, or no system at all. I will also return to this issue below.

Multiple Revelation

Real but Partial Revelations. Published just this year, Michael Kogan's chapter entitled "Toward a Pluralist Theology of Judaism"[118] argues that revelation is a nonnegotiable tenet of Jewish faith. "For believing Jews," he writes, "their religion is not a human projection but the result of an original divine outreach to humanity."[119] Revelation is a real connection between divine and human. Kogan is clear about revelation's centrality: "Judaism does not see itself as the product of a group of people who project their concept of God onto the void -- or even the 'Real.' The faith of Israel stands or falls on the conviction that the God of Israel ... has elected this people to be God's witness to the world."[120] Kogan's belief in chosenness and particular revelation is unambiguous and distinct from Jospe and Cohn-Sherbok's cultural subjectivity thesis.

Together with this doctrine of revelation, Kogan admits that the truth God reveals finds expression in contextual human terms. Indeed, "Revelation need not be conceived as a literal voice from heaven. Nor need one identify the Word of God precisely with the human words that bear it aloft."[121] He affirms the truth of revelation while acknowledging its cultural and linguistic contingencies and, consequentially, its manifestation in diverse

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[118] Kogan, 231-46.

[119] Ibid., 234.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid., 236.

religious expressions. A visual representation of Kogan's model as a Venn diagram would have God's circle in the center with the circles of various religions contained completely within God's; God encompasses all of them, but none of them encompasses all of God and, therefore, truth.

The Noahide covenant guides Kogan's understanding of non-Jewish religionists. Like the Sinai covenant, the Noahide revelation is in some deep sense true and everlasting. Interestingly, this covenant seemingly requires no dogmatic adherence; rather, it proscribes immoral behavior. In Kogan's words, "Judaism believes in a universal ethic but not a universal theology."[122] People of other faiths may believe differently, but their faith may be recognized by Jews as legitimate and even true if it motivates them to moral behavior. Like Jospe and Cohn-Sherbok, Kogan privileges moral convictions over theological convictions in his evaluation of which religions are true and legitimate.

Kogan's pluralism ultimately rests on a "multiple revelation theory"[123]: surely the God of the Jews who revealed the Noahide laws to the gentiles could speak at other times, to other peoples, in other languages and symbolic systems. We cannot reject this possibility *a priori*, but we must instead evaluate religions to find the extent to which they may contain true revelation from God. Kogan accepts "the pluralist principle that a religion is 'true' not because it accords with the true nature of God as God actually is (for who can know the divine nature in its totality?), but because that religion has the power to produce virtuous people."[124] In other, less precise words, Kogan argues that "all faiths are true that lead us

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[122] Ibid., 233.

[123] Ibid., 239.

[124] Ibid., 240.

from egocentricity to participation in the infinite life with all its ethical and spiritual blessings."[125]

Interestingly, like those discussed above, Kogan fails to defend or truly define his particular conceptions of *virtue* and *morality,* on Jewish or broader philosophical grounds, beyond praising their ability to enrich our lives.[126] If another faith claims to have heard God's Word proclaiming a moral practice that differs from ours, Kogan presumably would have us reject it as false revelation. Thus, Kogan allows us to maintain pluralism only within certain moral bounds -- those expressed in the Noahide covenant. His view allows for great symbolic, doctrinal, and ritual diversity among religious systems, but he rejects moral relativism. His is a theological pluralism within firmly prescribed moral limits that we must, apparently, take on faith.

An Orthodox Jewish Pluralism. The Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, who self-identifies as a Modern Orthodox Jew, aims toward a "dialectical embrace of covenantal particularism and theological universalism."[127] He fervently believes in the God of Israel and the special revelation and election of the Jewish people. A universalization of the election of Israel would culminate in "the universal truth of a philosophy antithetical to the concreteness of the God of Abraham,"[128] a concreteness which Wyschogrod upholds as essential to Judaism.

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[125] Ibid., 246.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Held, 325.

[128] Wyschogrod, 184.

However, Wyschogrod's very allegiance to Jewish tradition motivates his commitment to pluralism. The Noahide laws, in his view, are the content of God's revelation to the nations of the world.[129] They imply that God indeed reveals Himself to non-Jews. Moreover, similar to Kogan's view, Jews are not in the position to reject *a priori* the truth of revelation as received by other religious communities, "as if the Jewish philosopher can somehow determine ahead of time just what God can or cannot do, what is or is not possible for him [*sic*], what his dignity does or does not allow."[130] In other words, "Jews must not deny the possibility that God reaches out toward"[131] the other nations of the world.

How are we to explain, then, profound differences in doctrine and ritual among various religious traditions? The concept of multiple revelation provides Wyschogrod with an answer: God reveals different religious truths to different religious groups. "If Judaism cannot accept [a non-Jewish religious precept] it is because it does not hear this story, because the Word of God as it hears it does not tell it and because Jewish faith does not testify to it."[132] This notion of manifold exclusive revelations allows Wyschogrod to have his particularism and eat his pluralism, too, so to speak. In his "unapologetic affirmation of the God of Israel,"[133] Wyschogrod expresses also his radical belief in the ultimate transcendence of that God. While his Jewish revelation and covenant is bounded, exclusive, and particular, his God is not.

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[129] See esp. Wyschogrod, 185-86.

[130] Wyschogrod, 215.

[131] Held, 323.

[132] Wyschogrod, 215.

[133] Held, 325.

Because Wyschogrod relies so heavily on a Jewish scriptural foundation to justify his faith in a particular covenant and a universal God, it is harder to extend his theology past Christianity onto Islam, let alone non-Abrahamic religions. Wyschogrod would have to argue that even Hindusim, for example, which has nothing in common with Judaism in history, scripture, language, or theology, emanates from the same God of Israel. His belief in the infinite power and unpredictability of his God of Israel, taken to its logical conclusion, might allow for the possibility of many authentic revelations and religious systems even outside the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition.

A question remains: how does Wyschogrod evaluate whether a system is based on authentic revelation? Ultimately, he might answer with his notion that God's purpose for Jews is that "in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed."[134] Any true religion would be characterized, presumably, by a similar charge to be a blessing in the world. Wyschogrod also leaves us with a theological and doctrinal pluralism circumscribed within by moral absolutes.

A Never-ending Jewish Path (Where I now stand)

Asymptotic Pluralism. Franz Rosenzweig and, through him, Nietzsche have given us Jews a framework for thinking about truth in "perspectivist"[135] terms. On this view, a real existential encounter with the Divine -- which both Rosenzweig and Buber define as revelation -- precipitates an embodied expression of the content of that revelatory experience.

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[134] Wyschogrod, 236.

[135] I was introduced to this idea by Alexander Nehamas, Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, in a course on Nietzsche, Fall 2002.

This embodied expression will differ according to context; cultural, linguistic, and historical variations inevitably appear. As Rosenzweig argued, the inescapable subjectivity of responses to revelation does not render revelation itself meaningless or relativistic. As he wrote in the context of philosophical investigation,

> I really believe that a philosophy, to be adequate, must rise out of thinking that is done from the personal standpoint of the thinker. To achieve being objective, the thinker must proceed boldly from his own subjective situation. The single condition imposed upon us by objectivity is that we survey the entire horizon; but we are not obliged to make this survey from any position other than the one in which we are, nor are we obliged to make it from no position at all. Our eyes are, indeed, only our own eyes; yet it would be folly to imagine we must pluck them out in order to see straight.[136]

Our subjectivity both facilitates and checks our quest toward objectivity. Surely, our own particular mind enables us to access and analyze what reality there is behind the existential canvas of our lives. And just as surely, our own particular mind can only process reality within the parameters of its particular existence as our own particular mind.

Objective truth may be thought of as a mathematical asymptote, a line on a graph toward which a given curve continually approaches but does not meet at any finite distance. The ever-approaching curve represents our subjective striving toward truth. Though we will never reach that absolute, we may yet move ever closer to it through honest searching and careful acknowledgment of our subjectivity. Judaism is one such curve among many potential equations; we may each be at different points along the curve, or on different curves, but through relationship can help each other in the quest toward the ever-elusive objective.

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[136] Glatzer, 179.

Instruments of Meaning. Let us consider an extended metaphor to illustrate my vision of pluralism, truth, and religion. Imagine that there is such a thing as Music, which has some kind of abstract, objective reality. The nature of human embodiment denies us direct access to Music. Instead, we participate in it only through instruments, which are themselves embodied.

My instrument is piano; I grew up hearing it and playing it, and to this day I filter my experience of Music through the framework of piano music. When I want to experience Music, I sit down at the piano, or I listen to a recording of piano music. Then I experience a particular manifestation of Music which is not all-encompassing but is nonetheless a real and true expression of Music in a particular form.

I can appreciate music in other forms, too. Orchestra, guitar, and singing also let me share an experience of music. Still, piano remains -- for lack of a better phrase -- closest to my heart. That is, it is the *truest* experience of music for me.

Furthermore, some instruments are better than others for accessing Music. A French horn is superior to a kazoo, surpassing it in fullness of expression, beauty of tone, and ability to stir the listener's soul. Granted, these are somewhat subjective criteria and depend on cultural variation. An instrument can be said to be "true" or "legitimate" insofar as it facilitates the user or listener's experience of music.

If we overlay this metaphor onto religious systems, we imagine that there is such a thing as Truth or Meaning which is ultimately inaccessible by the human individual unmediated. We participate in it through instruments, i.e., religious systems. They are

embodied in the particular, preventing them from being all-encompassing without denying the echoes of truth that reside within.

Judaism is my instrument. I grew up learning it and participating in it, and to this day I filter my experience of Meaning through the framework of Judaism. When I want to experience Meaning, I turn to Judaism for guidance and participate in Jewish ritual and Jewish learning. Then I experience a particular manifestation of Meaning, embodied in Jewish form, that is nonetheless real and true.

In this way, Judaism is true and legitimate (for me) even as I acknowledge the truth of other religious systems that provide access to Meaning for other people. I may even benefit from exposure to their religious instruments, whether by learning something new about my own or by glimpsing Meaning in a new way through the system of another.

I affirm both the truth of Judaism, my particular instrument, and the truth of other instruments, because I have redefined “truth” in apposition to religious systems. When applied to an instrument, “true” becomes a description of its capacity to elevate its adherents to an experience of Meaning. In other words, “true” as I apply it to religious systems is not an objective factual statement but a contingent, experiential one. Like the thinkers above, I allow for a wide range of religious expression. Each varied particular instrument is legitimate insofar as it is effective in enabling its followers to participate in Meaning. Ultimately, I agree with the Subjective Revelation theory. I defend it with the principle that different religious systems are best for different people.

The Pluralist's Burden. Neither I nor these thinkers have provided an adequate response to what I shall call the Pluralist's Burden. That is, how should a committed pluralist understand non-pluralistic systems and individuals? If a religion proclaims its exclusive hold on truth and denies the validity of other systems, what is the appropriate, reasoned response? Fundamentalism challenges pluralism in precisely this way.

I propose a seemingly paradoxical dual response. On the one hand, I maintain my fundamental pluralistic conviction that truth finds many different and valid expressions. I cannot remain a pluralist if I sacrifice this belief, so I retain it and respectfully, if forcefully, disagree with fundamentalists and religionists who hold that only their religion is true in an objective sense.

On the other hand, as a pluralist, must I remain committed to my ideological opponents' exclusivist expression of faith? I answer in the qualified affirmative. While I may be positionally bound to accept the possibility of exclusivist religion, I am not reasonably bound to accept a faith that poses a moral or existential danger to me (and, by extension, to others). Here I find myself influenced by the thinkers discussed above, whose reliance on the Noahide laws as a standard for non-Jews gives me a precedent for establishing moral boundaries around even my rather far-reaching pluralism.

Rather than merely proclaiming a set of moral convictions or accepting them on faith in the Noahide laws, I would defend a certain degree of moral absolutism by arguing from prevention of harm. Surely, I can reasonably reject the absurdity of a situation in which I or any pluralist would have to accept and suffer another's religious faith that did us harm or killed us! My pluralism would accept even beliefs that I find profoundly disagreeable, unless

they motivate harmful action. I would include both bodily and emotional harm, acknowledging some degree of subjectivity in evaluating the latter.

As far as making progress in a practical way, I maintain a faith in the power of dialogue and relationship to transform ideas and the people who hold them. Inspired by the likes of Irving “Yitz” Greenberg and Jonathan Saks -- undoubtedly less theologically bent than homiletically oriented toward *tikkun olam* -- I uphold a commitment to interfaith and interpersonal dialogue as entailed by my theology of pluralism.

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**Recommended additions to the Selected Bibliography.*

A Note on Research Tools

The ATLA database, accessed through the HUC Jewish Studies portal, was initially very helpful in locating relevant sources. It connected me to the Jospe article as well as the Oxford Journals Online (http://www.oxfordjournals.org/), which allowed me to search a wide range of periodicals, including *Modern Judaism,* and to locate the Kogan volume. I got access to the full text through the NYU library system. Secondarily, Google also proved useful in locating additional sources. The downside to Google is that, in addition to finding relevant links, it also brings a heavy dose of dross. If one has the patience to separate the wheat from the chaff, it can be very rewarding. Finally, I found that one of the best bibliographic search tools was mining the citations of the initial sources I found. These often pointed me toward the relevant contemporary discussions of pluralism, though of course not without a degree of selectivity on my part.