The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

In contemporary society with its multiplicity of faiths, there has been an increasing interest in the relationship between the world's religions. Within Judaism only a few thinkers have grappled with the issue of religious pluralism, yet in Christian circles there has been considerable debate about the relationship between the Christian faith and other traditions. A number of conservative Christian theologians have espoused a traditional form of Exclusivism based on the assumption that Christianity contains the one true and final revelation from God. Other thinkers however have criticised such a doctrine for its narrowness. Disenchanted with Exclusivism, they have formulated a modified Christo-centric approach – Inclusivism – which affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religious while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive revelation of God. Although such a model of religious diversity is more liberal than the traditional Exclusivist stance, other Christian theologians have argued for an even greater tolerance of non-Christian religions. On their view, what is now required is a Copernican revolution in which the Divine, rather than Christ, is placed at the centre of the universe of faiths. This reflection about religious diversity can serve as the basis for a theoretical framework for assessing the Jewish response to other faiths over the centuries. As will be seen a number of Jewish writers from ancient times to the present have oscillated between Jewish Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism, but all have been concerned to make sense of Judaism in the context of other religious traditions.

JUDAISM AND THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

Recently there has been considerable discussion in Christian circles about the relationship between Christianity and the world's religions.

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Traditionally Christians have insisted that those outside the Church cannot be saved. To quote a classic instance of this view, the Council of Florence in the fifteenth century declared that; ‘no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not just pagans but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. Unless before the end of life they are joined to the Church.’ (Denzinger, 1952, no.714)

Increasingly, however, for many Christians this view has seemed highly improbable in the light of contact with other faiths. An important document issued by the Catholic Church in 1965 (Nostra Aetate), for example, declared that the truth that enlightens every person is reflected also in non-Christian religions. (Hallencruetz, 1977, 37) Never the less, while recognizing the value of other religions, this declaration maintained that the Christian is at the same time under the obligation to preach that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (Hallencruetz, 1977, 38)

Similar attitudes have also been adopted by various Christian theologians. Karl Rahner, for example, argued that salvation is open to adherents of other faiths since the devout Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Jew can be regarded as an anonymous Christian – a status granted to people who have not expressed any desire for it. (Rahner, 1976, Ch.17; 1979, Ch.3) Again, according to Hans Kung, the way is open to all people to attain eternal life in the world’s religions. As Kung remarked, ‘A man is to be saved within the religion that is made available to him in his historical situation.’ In this manner the world’s religions are ‘the way of salvation, in universal salvation history’, the general way of salvation, we can say, for the ordinary people of the world’s religions, the more common, the ‘ordinary’ way of salvation as against which the way of salvation in the Church occurs as something very special and extraordinary. (Neuner, 1967, 52-3)

Other Christian theologians have taken this view further by declaring that Christians must recognize the experience of God in Christ to be but one of many different divine encounters with what has been given to humankind. In this light Christianity should lay no claim to superiority. In the words of John Hick, ‘in his infinite fullness and richness of being he exceeds all our human attempts to grasp him in thought...the devout in fact worshipping the one God, but through different, overlapping concepts or mental icons of him.’ (Hick, 1980, 48–9)