

Heschel: No Religion is an Island / Dror Bondi

I speak as a member of a congregation whose founder was Abraham, and the name of my rabbi is Moses. I speak as a person who was able to leave Warsaw, the city in which I was born, just six weeks before the disaster began. My destination was New York, it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. I am a brand plucked from the fire, in which my people was burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory, and on which so much else was consumed: the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in the God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly two thousand years. I speak as a person who is often afraid and terribly alarmed lest God has turned away from us in disgust and even deprived us of the power to understand His word... Some of us are like patients in the state of final agony – who scream in delirium: the doctor is dead, the doctor is dead...

Nazism in its very roots was a rebellion against the Bible, against the God of Abraham. Realizing that it was Christianity that implanted attachment to the God of Abraham and involvement with the Hebrew Bible in the hearts of Western man, Nazism resolved that it must both exterminate the Jews and eliminate Christianity, and bring about instead a revival of Teutonic paganism. Nazism has suffered a defeat, but the process of eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the western world goes on. It is on the issue of saving the radiance of the Hebrew Bible in the minds of man that Jews and Christians are called upon to work together. None of us can do it alone. Both of us must realize that in our age anti-Semitism is anti-Christianity and that anti-Christianity is anti-Semitism...

The supreme issue is today not the Halacha for the Jew or the Church for the Christian – but the premise underlying both religions, namely, whether there is a pathos, a divine reality concerned with the destiny of man which mysteriously impinges upon history; the supreme issue is whether we are alive or dead to the challenge and the expectation of the living God... Horizons are wider, dangers are greater... No religion is an island...

On what basis do we people of different religious commitments meet one another? First and foremost we meet as human beings who have so much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fears, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kinship of being human. My first task in every encounter is to comprehend the personhood of the human being I face, to sense the kinship of being human, solidarity of being. To meet a human being is a major challenge to mind and heart. I must recall what I normally forget. A person is not just a specimen of the species called homo sapiens. He is all of humanity in one,

and whenever one man is hurt we are all injured. The human is a disclosure of the divine, and all men are one in God's care for man. Many things on earth are precious, some are holy, humanity is holy of holies.

To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the presence of God. According to a rabbinical interpretation, the Lord said to Moses: "Wherever you see the trace of man there I stand before you"... When engaged in a conversation with a person of different religious commitment I discover that we disagree in matters sacred to us, does the image of God I face disappear? Does God cease to stand before me? Does the difference in commitment destroy the kinship of being human? Does the fact that we differ in our conceptions of God cancel what we have in common: the image of God? ...

There are levels of existence where Jews and Christians meet as sons and brothers... To be sure all men are sons of one father, but they have also the power to forfeit their birthright, to turn rebels, voluntary bastards... It is not flesh and blood but honor and obedience that save the right of sonship. We claim brotherhood by being subject to His commandments. We are sons when we hearken to the Father, when we praise and honor Him.

The recognition that we are sons in obeying God and praising Him is the starting-point of my reflection. "I am a companion of all who fear Thee, of those who keep Thy precepts" (Ps. 119:63). I rejoice wherever His name is praised, His presence sensed, His commandment done. The first and most important prerequisite of interfaith is faith.

Religion is a means, not the end. It becomes idolatrous when regarded as an end in itself. Over and above all being stands the Creator and Lord of history, He who transcends all. To equate religion and God is idolatry. Does not the all-inclusiveness of God contradict the exclusiveness of any particular religion? The prospect of all men embracing one form of religion remains an eschatological hope. What about here and now? Is it not blasphemous to say: I alone have all the truth and the grace, and all those who differ live in darkness, and are abandoned by the grace of God?... Human faith is never final, never an arrival, but rather an endless pilgrimage, a being on the way. We have no answers to all problems... Heresy is often a roundabout expression of faith, and sojourning in the wilderness is a preparation for entering the promised land...