

Towards a Jewish Theology of Trilateral Dialogue

Norman Solomon

[A later version of this paper was published as 'Towards a Jewish Theology of Trilateral Dialogue,' in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace* ed. Roger Boase (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)].

For OJEC Amsterdam 14 November 2000

[Words: 4055]

The construction of a Jewish theology of trilateral dialogue starts with an easy task but leads to a hard one. The easy one is to affirm some of the values and doctrines to be found within Christianity and Islam, and to create a “theological space” in which these other faiths may be allowed a positive role in the divine plan. This is a well-rehearsed theme in Jewish tradition, expounded within even the most conservative circles.

But when this little mountain has been climbed a big one looms behind it. The traditional assumption, undisputed in pre-modern times, was that Judaism constituted the only fully authentic expression of divine revelation, the comprehensive and absolute truth. Acknowledgment of the value and truth contained in other faiths was at best patronising, tied to the assumption that one day all would come to realise the superior truth of Torah. The traditional texts do not make for a “dialogue of equals”.

I will take the soft option first, and describe traditional ways of “making theological space” for Christianity and Islam. After that, I shall explore the possibility that the dialogue might somehow become a dialogue of equals.

Traditional Ways of Making Space for the Other

The Hebrew scriptures are contemptuously dismissive of the religious cults of the surrounding peoples and especially of the previous inhabitants of the land of Israel:

And you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place. (Deuteronomy 12:3)

This attitude to “idol worship” has never changed. It continues to challenge Jews, Christians and Muslims in their relationship with Hindus and others who direct their worship through images; indeed, Jews and Muslims are uncomfortable even with Christian use of images and icons in worship.

Nevertheless, by late biblical times Israelites realised that there were other people in the world who worshipped the one, unseen God. Such people form the category of *yir'ei Hashem* (God-fearers, cf. Psalm 115:11); perhaps it is to them that the verse “From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is praised” (Psalm 113:3) refers.

By the third century CE, when the sages were defining Judaism and classifying the *mitzvot* (commandments), they accorded the status of *ger toshav* ('resident alien', cf. Lev. 25) to individuals who, whilst not identifying themselves with the Jewish people by commitment to the Sinai Covenant, abandoned idolatry. This recognition was formalised as the Noahide Covenant, consisting of seven commandments (*sheva mitzvot*):

The children of Noah were given seven commandments: Laws (i.e. to establish courts of justice), (the prohibitions of) Idolatry, Blasphemy, Sexual Immorality, Bloodshed, Theft, and the Limb from a Living Animal (certain types of cruelty to animals?).¹

Tosefta, which our our earliest source for this "code", interprets each of these 'commandments' in some detail, and the discussion is taken still further in the Talmud² and other rabbinic writings, where serious attempts are made to anchor the whole system in Scripture, particularly Genesis 9³.

Some scholars regard the Seven Commandments as a summary of natural law⁴. David Novak has argued that they constitute a 'theological-judicial theory rather than a functioning body of laws administered by Jews for gentiles actually living under their suzerainty at any time in history'; they are presented by the rabbis as 'pre-Sinaitic law perpetually binding on gentiles', and their precise formulation reflects 'a period in Jewish history when the line of demarcation between Jews and gentiles was fully drawn, and when Jews were required to determine those moral standards which were inherently right'⁵. This would have happened when the split between Judaism and Christianity was forcing strong lines of demarcation to be drawn.

Modern writers often state that the Seven Commandments include 'belief in God'; this is careless representation of either the prohibition of idolatry or that of blasphemy. None of the extant early versions of the *sheva mitzvot* expressly demands belief in God. Why is this? Most probably because the rabbis were far more concerned with rejecting of idolatry than with the formulating definitions of God. An explicit demand for belief in God would have required some understanding, some definition, of God, and this was precisely the area into which the rabbis did not wish to enter. They asked only that the worship of idols cease and the worship of God be taken seriously and treated with respect; there was to be no emphasis on the substantive content of belief in God. Precise

¹ Tosefta *Avoda Zara* 9:4. Some scholars have claimed to discover a hint of the *sheva mitzvot* in Acts 15:29; this is far-fetched and anachronistic. The Tosefta is an early rabbinic supplement to and commentary on the Mishna, perhaps originating in the mid to late third century.

² Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 55b onwards.

³ Novak, David, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*, New York and Toronto: Edward Mellen Press, 1983, chapter 1, and *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, chapter 1.

⁴ See for instance Novak's interesting discussion on pp. 231 f. of Samuel Atlas' suggestion that the distinction between the Noahide law of robbery and the Jewish law of robbery was the rabbis' way of making a conceptual distinction between natural and covenantal law. N. Rakover, 'The "Law" and the Noahides', *Jewish Law Association Studies* (Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1990) pp.169-180, explores the differences between Noahide and Jewish law, and finds it helpful to understand Noahide law and 'a sort of natural human law' (p. 172).

⁵ Novak *Image of the Non-Jew...*, 34.

descriptions of the nature of God did not matter, holiness of life did. In conformity with this view the third century Palestinian Rabbi Yohanan declared: Whoever denies idolatry is called *yehudi* (a Jew).⁶ Novak is mistaken when he claims that Rabbi Isaac, who places the prohibition of idolatry first in his list, holds that “God’s absolute authority over man is the beginning of the Noahide law and its foundation”⁷. It is the rejection of idolatry, and the respect for God-talk and worship, not the recognition of a defined divine authority, which is the foundation of Noahide law as conceived by the rabbis.

Maimonides held that a gentile ought to adopt the Noahide laws not merely because they are rational but through acceptance of the fact that God had commanded them in scripture⁸. He did not doubt that the human intellect, used with integrity, would lead one to belief in the authenticity of the biblical text and tradition, hence to the assumption that correct belief would accompany moral virtue.

On 26 October 1773 Moses Mendelssohn initiated a correspondence on this theme with Rabbi Jacob Emden of Altona (1697-1776):

And to me these matters are difficult ... that all the inhabitants of the earth from the rising to the setting of the sun are doomed, except us ... unless they believe in the Torah which was given to us an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob alone, especially concerning a matter not at all explicit in the Torah ... what will those nations do upon whom the light of the Torah has not shone at all?⁹

Mendelssohn, rather than Maimonides and Emden, has become the model for subsequent Jewish thinking, and writers such as David Hartman have readily adopted the Covenant with Noah as the ‘theological space’ within which to accommodate people of others faith notwithstanding their rejection of scripture or rabbinic interpretation.

Attempts have been made to implement the Noahide concept on a practical level. The kabbalist rabbi Elia Benamozegh of Leghorn (1823-1900), for instance, persuaded a Catholic would-be convert to Judaism, Aimé Pallière, to adopt Noahism rather than full-blown Judaism. Pallière championed Noahism until the end of his life in 1949; he attracted interest rather than followers.¹⁰ In the late twentieth century a number of Southern Baptists and others in the USA converted to a form of Noahism with some measure of Jewish encouragement; Aaron Lichtenstein observed that “the worst hardship borne by practicing Noahites is the lack of fellowship”¹¹. An organization of “B’nai Noah”

⁶ Babylonian Talmud *Megilla* 13a.

⁷ Novak *Image of the Non-Jew...*, 108, referring to Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 56b.

⁸ Maimonides *Mishneh Torah Hilkhoh Melakhim* 8:11. For a full discussion, see Chapter 10 of Novak’s work.

⁹ Moses Mendelssohn *Gesammelte Schriften* XVI pp. 178-80. I have used Novak’s translation in his *Image of the Non-Jew* ... p. 370, to which reference should be made.

¹⁰ E. Benamozegh, *Morale Juive et Morale Chrétienne* (1867). Benamozegh’s magnum opus first appeared in Paris in 1914 under the title *Israël et L’Humanité*, and a new and revised edition was published by Albin Michel, Paris in 1961. Marco Morselli’s Italian translation *Israele e L’Umanità* was being published by Casa Editrice Marietti in 1990. Pallière’s main work is *Le Sanctuaire Inconnu*; the most recent English version is *The Unknown Sanctuary* trans. L. W. Wise (New York: 1985).

¹¹ See Aaron Lichtenstein’s ‘Who Cares About The Seven Laws Of Noah? A Status Report’, *Jewish Law Association Studies* IV (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990) pp. 181-190. See also

with some thousands of followers is based at Athens, Tennessee, where its Emmanuel Study Center publishes a bimonthly journal, *The Gap*.

Closer to the mainstream of Jewish religious activity is the impetus the *sheva mitzvot* concept gives to Jews to accept moral responsibility in society in general, for it demands that support and encouragement be given to ‘the nations’ to uphold at least this standard. A notable instance of this was a series of public addresses and interventions by the hassidic leader Menahem Mendel Schneersohn (the ‘Lubavitcher Rebbe’) of New York (1902-1994) in which he expounded the Noahide laws in relation to the needs of contemporary society. This included an exchange of letters with President Reagan in 1986 in which he commended the president for ‘giving valuable support to the dissemination of the Seven Noahide Laws, so basic to any society worthy of its name ...’¹².

Some generations before the formulation of the Noahide Laws rabbis Joshua and Gamaliel II had debated whether unconverted gentiles “have a portion in the world to come”; subsequent Jewish tradition has endorsed Joshua’s view that “the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come”¹³. This doctrine is a rabbinic assertion of the ability of every human being, even *unconverted*, to find favour in the eyes of God; Judaism does not have an equivalent to *extra ecclesiam non est salus* (there is no salvation outside the Church)¹⁴. However, it leaves undefined what constitutes a “righteous” person; some rabbis would exclude from this category anyone who denied the authenticity of scripture or of the rabbinic tradition of interpretation.

The reports of this debate between Joshua and Gamaliel do not use the term “saved”, but the relatively cumbersome expression “have a portion in the world to come”. Quite possibly this reflects a rejection of the perceived Christian presupposition that people are somehow “condemned” until “saved” by a special act of cosmic redemption which must be believed in to be efficacious.

Diogenes Laertius (second century CE) attributed to both Socrates and Thales the saying: “I thank Tyche that I was born a human being and not an animal, a man and not a woman, a Greek and not a barbarian”¹⁵. This striking utterance rebounded across cultural barriers, modifying its meaning, and illuminating thereby the differences between the cultures.

Lichtenstein’s own book *The Seven Laws of Noah* 2nd ed. (Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press: New York, 1986).

¹² It would be useful to have a bibliography of Lubavitch writings on the Noahide Laws. There are numerous pamphlets and addresses, and even a ‘moral video’ directed to non-Jews. An Abbreviated Code of Jewish Law for non-Jews is also said to be in preparation. In fact, compilations of this sort already exist, for instance the Joel Schwartz’ Hebrew *OR LE’AMIM* Devar Yerushalayim Jerusalem 1984, and Solomon Schonfeld’s *The Universal Bible* (London, 1955).

¹³ Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 13.

¹⁴ Augustine *De Bapt.* iv, c, xcii, 24. Cf Cyprian’s earlier *habere non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem* in *De Cath. Eccl. Unitate* vi.

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius 1:33. See Martin Hengel’s *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians* (London: SCM Press, 1980) p. 78 and chapter 7, for an exploration of the idea of racial superiority in the Hellenistic world.

Paul, for instance, had already said (Galatians 3:28): “There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus”. Scholars differ radically in their interpretations of Paul’s words. Still, the context of “faith versus law” in which the remark is set means that it is and was popularly understood as meaning that faith, or belief (whether or not that means propositional belief) in Christ Jesus was that which saved - belief, not deeds. Belief, according to Paul, is the criterion of God’s favour, and it is the line of demarcation between the issue of Abraham and other people.

A rabbinic variant runs: “I call to witness heaven and earth, that whether *goy* (gentile) or Jew, whether man or woman, whether manservant or maidservant, it is entirely according to the deeds of the individual that the heavenly spirit rests upon him”¹⁶. This sentence cannot have been the model for Galatians 3:28, for none of its many versions is early enough. Rather, it is a comment, a reaction. The rabbis countered Paul (whether or not they were directly aware of his words) with the statement that “all is in accordance with the deeds of the individual” - a view firmly in accord with the prophet Ezekiel’s stress on the concept of individual responsibility.¹⁷

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, *PRAEPARATIO EVANGELICA*

Another way to accommodate Christianity and Islam within Jewish theology, to find ‘theological space’ for them, is hinted at by Sa’adia Gaon (882-942)¹⁸ and more fully developed by Judah Halevi (c. 1075-1141) and Moses Maimonides (1135/8-1204). Islam and Christianity are in error, but can be accommodated as part of the divine design to bring the nations gradually to God. The other monotheistic religions, says Halevi, “serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become his fruit.”¹⁹

In a paragraph censored from the printed editions of his *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides rejects the truth-claims of Christianity and Islam on the basis that they fail to meet the criterion of consistency with the Torah of Moses. Despite this, he assigns both Christianity and Islam a role in the process of world redemption: “The teachings of him of Nazareth (Jesus) and of the man of Ishmael (Mohammed) who arose after him help to bring all mankind to perfection, so that they may serve God with one consent. For insofar as the whole world is full of talk of the Messiah, of words of Holy Writ and of the Commandments—these words have spread to the ends of the earth, even if many deny

¹⁶ The version I have translated is that in *Yalkut Shimoni* on Judges 5. See also Tosefta *Berakhot* 7:18; Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 9:2; Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 43b.

¹⁷ Ezekiel 18. See P. Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel*, Supplement Series 51 of the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Sheffield: 1989).

¹⁸ Sa’adia ben Joseph *Kitab fi al-Amanat wa-al-Itaqadat* (Arabic) Book II Chapter 5. Rosenblatt’s translation has been republished as Samuel Rosenblatt (trans.), *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989. Sa’adia is of course highly critical of Christological doctrine, but this does not blind him to the positive aspects of Christianity.

¹⁹ Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, tr. Hartwig Hirschfeld, 2nd ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.

their binding character at the present time. When the Messiah comes all will return from their errors.”²⁰

Several mediaeval Jewish thinkers, unlike the rabbis of the Talmud, were familiar with Christian and Muslim texts, and offered comment, whether by way of defence or instruction. Sometimes this is found in the context of the forced “disputations” which elicited from Jews much keen apologetic²¹.

The Provençal rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri (d. c1315) coined the expression *umot hagedurot bedarkei hadatot* (“nations bound by the ways of religion”) to avoid identification of Christians in his own time with pagan idolaters, and used this category to justify what was probably already a customary relaxation of certain rabbinic laws²². This enabled a positive evaluation if not of the doctrines, at least of the way of life, of Christians.

The acknowledgement that some truth may be found in other religions is as far as most were prepared to go in the “age of faith”, when religions rested on their absolute truth claims. The concept is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It seems to have arisen first in Christianity, when Christians attempted to explain their relationship with Judaism. Since Christianity sought to “prove” itself by claiming to “fulfil” the Hebrew scriptures it developed a hermeneutic of those scriptures as *praeparatio evangelica*, “preparation for the good news”. That is, the Israelites and the Jews who succeeded them were “on the way”, but had not completed the journey. Muhammed, the “seal of the prophets”, accomplished the same sort of “completion” for Islam, leaving Judaism and Christianity as steps on the way to full Islam. It is hardly surprising to find that mediaeval Jewish thinkers adopted the same condescending attitude towards Christianity and Islam.

AUTHENTIC, BUT CULTURE-BOUND, PROPHECY

Was it not possible to move beyond “condescension” to an acknowledgment that authenticity might be found in the “other”? This is hardly what the Spanish Jewish poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol (c1020-58) had in mind when he penned the lines:

Thy glory is not diminished by those worshipping others beside thee,

For they all but aim to come to Thee²³.

For he continues:

²⁰ Maimonides *Mishné Torah Melakhim* 11.

²¹ See H. Maccoby (ed. and tr.), *Judaism On Trial: Jewish Christian Disputations In The Middle Ages*. London: Associated University Presses, 1982. Republished Oxford: Littman Library, 1992. Krauss, Samuel, ed. William Horbury, *A Handbook to the History of Christian-Jewish Controversy from the Earliest Times to 1789*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1996. Lasker, Daniel, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages*. New York: Ktav/Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1977.

²² Meiri’s views are expressed in his talmudic commentaries, especially that on *Avoda Zara*. For an English language account and discussion see Katz, *op. cit.* chapter 10.

²³ Solomon Ibn Gabirol, *Keter Malkhut* #8. Translated by Israel Zangwill, in Zangwill, Israel, *Selected Religious Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1923, 85/6.

And all of them imagine they have attained their desire, but they have laboured in vain.

Only thy servants are discerning, and walk in the right way.

The further step was however taken by an admirer of Ibn Gabirol, the Jewish neo-Platonist Netanel ibn Fayyumi (d. c. 1164), leader of the Jews of Yemen, who adopted into a Jewish context ideas current amongst the Sufi brethren, the *Ikhwan es-Safa*. Netanel asserts the authenticity of the prophecy of Muhammad, as revealed in the Qur'an, and at least the possibility that there are additional authentic revelations (he does not mention Christianity).

Here are the steps by which Netanel establishes his contention that the prophecy of Muhammad is authentic:

The first creation of God was the Universal Intellect its exuberant joy and happiness caused an overflow, and thus there emanated from it the Universal Soul (pages 2, 94²⁴)

Through the necessity of His wisdom He mercifully vouchsafed unto mortals a revelation from the holy world—the world of the Universal Soul—which originated from the overflow of its holy cause, the Universal Intellect—which in turn goes back to its originator—may He be exalted! This expressed itself in an individual man whose spirit is free from the impurity of nature and is disciplined in the noblest science and the purest works [a] prophet. (95)

Know then nothing prevents God from sending into His world whomsoever He wishes, since the world of holiness sends forth emanations unceasingly Even before the revelation of the Law he sent prophets to the nations and again after its revelation nothing prevented Him from sending to them whom He wishes so that the world might not remain without religion. (103/4)

.... Mohammed was a prophet to them but not to those who preceded (sc. were prior to) them in the knowledge of God²⁵. (105)

.... He permitted to every people something He forbade to others. (107)

He sends a prophet to every people according to their language²⁶. (109)

Netanel interprets revelation in a “naturalistic” fashion. It is a universal phenomenon, of which Muhammad is a specific instance. He parallels his philosophical arguments with a skilful use of Jewish midrashic material.

Netanel's position differs radically from the *praeparatio* stance of Maimonides and others. Maimonides, for all his acknowledgment of the purity of Islamic monotheism and the historic function of Islam in preparing for the Messiah, crudely refers to

²⁴ References are to the translation by D. Levine, *The Garden of Wisdom*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1907, reprinted 1966. The best edition of the Judaeo-Arabic text, with a Hebrew translation and notes, is Y. Kafih's second version, *Bustan el-Uqul: Gan ha-Sekhalim*. Jerusalem: Halikhot Am Israel, 5744/1984.

²⁵ Netanel assumes that older equals better.

²⁶ Compare Qur'an Sura 14:4.

Muhammad as *ha-meshugga*. Netanel is neither casual nor tongue in cheek in his assessment of Muhammad; his affirmation of Muhammad's prophetic authenticity is not an *ad hoc* or *ad hominem* argument, but a key statement within an extensively elaborated philosophical system which carries the social implication of respect for the heirs of the prophets, these heirs being the "imams, administrators, the learned and the wise"²⁷.

Netanel, unsurprisingly for a man of his time, maintains the absolute superiority of the revelation through Moses; superior because the Israelites were on a sufficiently high spiritual plane to receive it. What is nevertheless remarkable is his acceptance of plural revelations and of the culture-boundedness of revelation. In this, he is far more a philosopher for our time than was the celebrated Maimonides.

Away from Religious Absolutism and Essentialism

In 1973 the Viennese-born Reform rabbi and philosopher Ignaz Maybaum (1897–1976), by then long resident in England, published a volume entitled "Dialogue between Jew, Christian and Muslim". Maybaum, building on the work of his mentor Franz Rosenzweig, sees the tasks of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as complementary. Christianity, in his view, develops the spiritual aspect of religion, Islam its political dimension; Judaism alone maintains the essential balance to correct the excesses of the other two. The characteristic forms taken by Christianity and Islam are not arbitrary, but fit them for their historic missions in the process of world redemption.

This simplistic account of the characters of the three religions is grossly misleading; each has occurred in a wide range of forms, spiritual, authoritarian, both or neither. Judaism, for instance, manifests itself both in extreme other-worldly guise, as amongst the twelfth century Hasidei Ashkenaz, and in authoritarian guise, as amongst some of the contemporary Orthodox. Maybaum knows this full well, so dismisses such manifestations of Judaism as "not really Jewish", but intrusions of Christianity and Islam respectively; in his view, only Liberal Judaism is truly Jewish. It is unclear what he thinks about the numerous forms of Christianity and Islam that do not correspond to his stereotypes. This stereotyping of religions, as that of such concepts as "Hebrew thought" and "Greek thought", must be categorically rejected. It is closely akin to the "essentialism" which, through racial or ethnic stereotyping, has wrought such grave damage in our societies. The historical reality is that there is not one 'ideal' Judaism (or Christianity or Islam) out there, but a rich and varied tradition comprising many Judaisms.

Moreover, the Rosenzweig/Maybaum line does not escape the triumphalism and condescension inherent in the mediaeval theologies. This is perhaps most obvious when one considers Rosenzweig's oft-cited argument that Christians need Jesus as "son of God" to bring them "to the Father", whereas Jews do not need Jesus because they are already "with the Father"²⁸. Why, after two thousand years of Christianity, should a

²⁷ Levine English p. 51; Arabic p. 31.

²⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* 2nd German edition (1930) trans. William Hallo, Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame, 1970, Part 3 Book 2. See pages 350 and 396, and Maybaum's comments in 86 f.

difference remain, and Christians, many of whom come from families devoted to Christianity for centuries, find it necessary to convert to their religion with the aid of an approachable mediator, whereas Jews, even totally secular ones, are thought to have an easy familiarity with God from birth?

Rosenweig's remark was probably apt at the time it was made; Jewish apologetics demanded such a rebuttal of persistent Christian attempts to belittle Judaism and convert Jews to Christianity. Moreover, this was an age of essentialism, when Harnack and Baeck could respectively dogmatize about exactly what a "true" Christian or Jew was²⁹, selectively ignoring the realities of their respective communities. Rosenzweig was following Judah Halevi, whose poetry he loved and translated; Halevi maintained that the Jewish race as such had a distinctive spiritual quality. Such a doctrine may have passed in the eleventh century (Halevi himself had "transposed" it from the Muslim philosopher Al-Qassim's self-understanding as a Shiite), but is surely no longer acceptable at a time when the world has learned to reject racism.

Conclusion

The organisers of this symposium have spoken of a "narrative purpose which binds diverse essays and contributors together". I interpret this as the attempt to reformulate our religious traditions in terms of enlightenment/(post-)modern understanding and to demonstrate their relevance to the contemporary situation. Those of us who are engaged in interfaith dialogue have discovered is that this is a common enterprise, not specific to any one faith group. It is in this discovery that I find a way to articulate a theology of trilateral dialogue which maintains continuity with earlier strands in Jewish teaching but does not make extravagant claims of truth or superiority on behalf of Judaism.

The underlying principles are as follows:

1. It is impossible, historically, to establish a single, 'ideal' or 'authentic' form of any religion. Traditions within each of the three religions are too diverse to permit this.
2. This diversity is not a fault, but a sign of the spiritual creativity of each faith, of its continuous "dialogue with God".
3. The diverse forms are expressions of faith occasioned by the diversity of human personalities and cultures.

Do these assumptions relativize religious faith unduly? Certainly, they demand that we abandon the absolutist claims of our predecessors. This demand does not arise primarily from within the interfaith dialogue itself, but from the critical impact of modernity, not least of historical studies, on all traditional expressions of religion.

²⁹ Adolf von Harnack's original lectures *Das Wesen des Christentums* were given in Berlin in 1899/1900 and Leo Baeck's response, *Das Wesen des Judentums* (The Essence of Judaism), was published in 1905.

Although diverse forms of expression of faith come about because of the diversity of human personalities and cultures, each individual is rooted to a particular time, place, and community. I, as an individual, find myself within a particular community and derive my sense of identity, my forms of expression, my strength, from that location. So far as I am concerned there is nothing “relative” about this; I am quite unambiguously located in a particular time, place, and community. I cannot “negotiate” my location; it is an objective fact. (This is not to deny that there might be circumstances in which I would decide to move.) I recognize that you, too, are unambiguously located in a time, place, and community. When we both accept this situation we can engage in a dialogue without threatening or feeling threatened.

In the dialogue:

1. There is mutual recognition that we are in different “places”, without any one of those places being specially privileged. The beginning of dialogue is simply to disclose to ourselves and to each other what these places are. We must discover ourselves as individuals, not as representatives of religious establishments.
2. There will be openness to the diversity within each tradition.
3. There will be discussion of relationships, including frank acknowledgement of past hurts, with the aim of fostering mutual trust.
4. There will be recognition of common problems arising from the confrontation with modernity. This will include not only the theological issues about God, revelation, redemption and the like, but also social and political issues. When the problems are seen as shared, we can explore them together, drawing critically on the resources of all our traditions.

What I have outlined is a truly creative dialogue. There is of course need for dialogue at less creative levels. There is dialogue amongst representatives of religious establishments; this can produce guidelines for better relationships. There is dialogue amongst unreformed fundamentalists; this is certainly better than harangue or violence directed at one another. And individuals who take part in either can move on to something better, for no-one remains unchanged in dialogue.

Paul van Buren has spoken of Jews and Christians “travelling together”³⁰. This metaphor, which must be extended at least to Muslims, aptly describes the adventure of dialogue.

Dr. Norman Solomon, The Oriental Institute, Pusey Lane, Oxford OX1 2LE
November 2000

³⁰ Van Buren, Paul M., *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*. 3 vols. Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1995.