PLURALISM OUT OF THE SOURCES OF JUDAISM: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM WITHOUT RELATIVISM

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Preface: Christian Challenges

For some years the subject of religious pluralism has intrigued me, and has been the subject of several articles dealing with the concept of chosenness, exclusivity vs. inclusivity, and the compatibility of chosenness with pluralism.[1] My thesis is that the Jewish concept of the chosen people, correctly understood, is not externally directed, implying that Jews in fact are better than other people, but is, rather, internally directed, challenging Jews to become better people. Such a concept, I maintain, is compatible with religious pluralism, based on the paradigm of the Jewish obligation to live in accordance with the commandments of the Torah while accepting the legitimacy of other ways of life in accordance with the paradigm of the universal "seven commandments of the children of Noah." What I propose is a reversal of traditional claims. 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, however understood), 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).

As I readily acknowledge, my thoughts on these questions were prompted and enriched by two Roman Catholic thinkers. Radical Catholic scholar Hans Küng has said that without peace among the world's religions, there will be no peace among the nations,[2] a proposition that strikes me as self-evidently true, especially in this era of the "global village" and growing world-wide religious fanaticism, strife and terror.[3] In our part of the world, it is unfortunately a fact that

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[1] See my articles: "The Concept of the Chosen People: An Interpretation" in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal* 170, vol. 43, no. 2 (Spring, 1994): 127-148; "Educating for Interreligious Responsibility: Ritual Exclusivity vs. Spiritual Inclusivity" in *Caring for Future Generations: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel Agius and Lionel Chircop (Twickenham: Admantime Press, 1998), 20-41; "Chosenness in Judaism: Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity", in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, eds. Raphael Jospe, Truman Madsen and Seth Ward (Madison & Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press / Associated University Presses, 2001), 173-194.

[2] Hans Küng, "World Peace – World Religions – World Ethic" in eds., Agius and Chircop, *Caring for Future Generations*, 69-81, especially 74.

[3] While modern weapons of mass destruction obviously render the problem more urgent, the concern that religions not create or exacerbate deadly conflict is not new. Küng's call for peace among the religions is reminiscent, for example, of "On the Peace of Faith" ("De Pace Fidei") of Nicolaus of Cusa (1401-1464), which opens with the prayer that God "might moderate the persecution, which raged more than usual on account of diverse religious rites." (Nicolaus of Cusa, *Toward a New Council of Florence*, trans. William Wertz, Jr. [Washington, D.C., 1993], 231). "Many turn their weapons against each other for the sake of religion and in their power compel men to renounce long observed doctrines or kill them. . .It is a condition of earthly human nature to defend as truth lengthy custom, which is regarded as part of nature. And thus no small dissensions arise, when any community prefers its beliefs over another's." (*ibid*, 232-233) In turn, we find remarkable similarity between some of the arguments in "On the Peace of Faith" and positions expressed in the "Letters of the Brethren of Purity" (*Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa*), a collection of 51 or 52 letters (depending on the numbering) of a tenth-century group of Isma'ili Muslim intellectuals in Baṣra. (See I.R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982] and Lenn Evan Goodman, *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn* [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978]). For example, in the letter "On the Generation of Animals and Their Kinds," we find that the King of the Jinn asks the Persian spokesman why do people "slay one another if all their faiths have the same goal of encounter with God?" The Persian replies: "This does not arise from faith, for 'there is no compulsion in faith,' rather, it comes from the institution of faith, that is from the state. . .Religion cannot do

religion is rarely a force for peace and is usually used (or abused) to exacerbate conflicts that are basically national and political, not theological, in nature.

On the other hand, in 1994, in an interreligious conference in Jerusalem, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), who is generally known for his conservative approach, and who was at the time the Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, asked whether we can move from mere toleration to mutual acceptance.[4] This question had a profound influence on the development of my own thought, as I have attempted to develop a Jewish paradigm for pluralism.[5]

However, as is often the case with thinkers, the question posing an intellectual challenge is far more important than the specific answer proposed by the thinker himself. For as became clear in his subsequent official declaration *Dominus Iesus*, Ratzinger's call for mutual acceptance means only

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without a ruler to command the people to uphold his institutions out of allegiance or by force. This is the cause of the adherents' of different religions slaying one another – the quest for primacy and power in the state. Each desires that all people should follow his own faith or sect and the laws of his own religion." (Translation by Lenn Evan Goodman in *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, p. 194). The quote "There is no compulsion in faith" (or: "Let there be no compulsion in religion") is from the Qur'an, Sura 2:256, "*la ikraha fi'l din*."

[4] Ratzinger posed this challenge in the International Jewish-Christian Conference on Religious Leadership in a Secular Society in Jerusalem (February, 1994).

[5] In this age of wide-spread, murderous religious fanaticism and terror, mere toleration would frequently be a great improvement. This paper attempts to develop, in response to Ratzinger's challenge, a Jewish paradigm for moving beyond toleration to pluralism. Irving "Yitz" Greenberg argues for going beyond pluralism to Jewish-Christian partnership. (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* [Philadelphia, 2004], 42). Later in the book (p. 119), however, he refers to "the possibility of true pluralism, i.e., a love pluralism of passionate people, not the tolerance of apathy."

respect for the personal equality of the other, and not acceptance of the other's doctrinal position *per se*. Such acceptance can at best be only *de facto* and not *de iure*, according to Ratzinger: "The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure*."[6]

This Roman Catholic concern about relativism, and the equation of religious pluralism with relativism, were reflected several years later, when I was sent by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to lecture at the Vatican (in September, 2001), and presented my pluralistic thesis at the Urbaniana Pontifical University in Rome. The Rettore Magnifico Abrogio Spreafico asked me whether the pluralism I propose is not, in fact, tantamount to relativism. I replied that I don't equate pluralism with relativism, and then said that even if my epistemology is wrong, I am morally certain that relativism has not killed people the way absolutism has. My reply received horrorful confirmation exactly 24 hours later. Unknown to me, while I was flying back to Israel from Rome, the murderous 9/11 attacks of Al-Qa'idah in America were taking place.

A Jewish Challenge: Menachem Kellner

Shifting from Roman Catholic influences on the development of my thought to the context of contemporary constructive Jewish philosophy, my position on pluralism stands in theoretical contrast to the thought of my friend and esteemed colleague Menachem Kellner, professor of Jewish philosophy at the University of Haifa. Although in practical terms of traditional religious lifestyle, Zionist commitment,

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[6] "Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church" (August 6, 2000).

and moral and political values Kellner and I aren't far apart, in theory we differ sharply, and our two papers in the volume on *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism* represent clearly contrasting views.[7] I have called Kellner's approach "an enlightened and sophisticated form of traditional triumphalism,"[8] because in Kellner's view, "in the messianic future" the dichotomy between Jews and gentiles "will be overcome, and all human beings will share the same relationship with God. In the messianic world, there will be no Jews and gentiles, only worshippers of the one true God."[9] The distinction between Jews and gentiles will be "overcome" not because all gentiles will convert to Judaism in its current, particularistic form, but because (in Kellner's reading of Maimonides, with whom he identifies), Judaism is really a matter of affirming the truth and not merely an ethnic identity, and, therefore, by accepting the truth the gentiles, in effect, will become Jewish in a universal sense: "The messianic age will witness not so much a triumph of Judaism so much as the triumph of truth."[10]

Kellner concludes:

I must express my sympathy for Maimonides. To my mind the "postmodern" approach takes an unfortunate reality – that we cannot agree on what is true, or even on what truth is – and turns it into an ideal. This position is, I think, self-refuting to the extent that it makes real communication

among human beings impossible. It is also based upon a rejection of the idea of revelation, at least as it has been historically understood in Judaism, according to which the Torah is truth. This truth may be misunderstood, it may be viewed differently in different times, it may be better or worse understood as we get further from Sinai and closer to the Messiah, it may exist only in Heaven, here being approximated, but truth there is. In short, Maimonides' vision of a universalist, not pluralist, messianic future was unusual in his day, consistent with his basic beliefs, necessitated by the understanding that revelation teaches truth, and thoroughly admirable.[11]

Kellner's position is clear: pluralism is at best an "unfortunate reality" in our current condition, and is, moreover, "self-refuting." What we must strive for is the ultimate triumph in messianic times of universal truth, a truth that Kellner believes is taught in historic Jewish revelation.

This view is reiterated and reinforced in an important recent book, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*:[12] "Judaism teaches truth, and. . .Orthodoxy understands that truth more completely than competing versions of Judaism. These competing versions are wrong and mistaken." Nevertheless, on several theoretical and pragmatic grounds Kellner argues that calling these versions "heretical is simply not helpful."[13] But Kellner cautions us: Although he rejects "Maimonides' dogmatic version of Judaism", he does not "wish at the same time to reject the. . .claims that Judaism teaches truth and

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[7] Kellner's paper, "Overcoming Chosenness", pp. 147-172 maintains a universalistic understanding of the truth, and proposes a Maimonidean universal "religion of truth" for the future.

[8] "Chosenness in Judaism: Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity", p. 193 note 28. Irving "Yitz" Greenberg (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, p. 134) writes: "Surrendering religious exclusivism or triumphalism is a crucial moral step."

[9] Kellner, "Overcoming Chosenness", 152.

[10] Ibid., 160.

[11] ibid, 160.

[12] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999); second edition with new Afterword (2006), 125.

[13] ibid, 125.

that there is one absolute truth – for these are claims that I am in no way willing to give up."[14]

In his new Afterword to the second edition, Kellner adds that there is a problem

> inherent in the concept of religious pluralism itself: why not extend the bounds of pluralism beyond the bounds of Judaism? If one relativizes truth within Judaism, on what grounds can one refuse to relativize it outside Judaism?[15]

Kellner's argument here – that internal Jewish pluralism is unacceptable because one could then no longer oppose external religious pluralism – strikes me as a peculiar adoption of the logic employed by Peter Stuyvesant, the governor of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (what would later become New York), who in 1654 attempted unsuccessfully to keep Jews out of the colony, arguing that "giving them liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists."[16] Kellner's objection to recognition of Jewish dissenting opinion is thus justified on the grounds that it might lead, God forbid, to recognition of Christian dissenting opinion.

Kellner's logic is the opposite of that employed by Moses Mendelssohn. In his Preface (written in March, 1782) to the German translation of Manassah ben Israel's *Vindiciae Judaeorum*,[17] Mendelssohn argued that the Jews could scarcely expect to be tolerated by Christians, from whom they differ so fundamentally, so long as they are themselves

intolerant of much less significant internal, Jewish dissent: "If you wish to be shown concern, tolerance and forebearance by others, show concern, tolerance and forebearance to each other."[18] Mendelssohn's argument, that external, interreligious toleration, should lead to internal, intra-religious toleration, strikes me as far more persuasive than Kellner's argument against internal Jewish pluralism on the grounds that it might lead to external religious pluralism.

Kellner's argument also fails to deal with what I regard as empirically true, certainly of many Jews and Christians, and probably also of many Muslims: it is often far easier to attain external, interreligious toleration or pluralism than it is to attain internal toleration or pluralism within the religious community.

Most of my thesis in this paper relates to pluralism in general, without specific regard for important questions pertaining to possible differences between internal and external forms of pluralism. At this point, on the level of internal pluralism (or at least toleration), I would note that Kellner's statement, "Judaism teaches truth, and… Orthodoxy understands that truth more completely than competing versions of Judaism" strikes me as counterfactual, or at best as wishful thinking. Jewish Orthodoxy (and it is ironic that the ideology adopts an explicitly Christian name), in its modern, enlightened and moderate form – as typified by people like Kellner – is today an endangered species, and has been completely outflanked and overwhelmed by Ḥaredi ultra-Orthodoxy, which is largely fundamentalist (another Christian term), literalist in its traditional, rabbinic reading of the Bible and the Talmud,

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[14] ibid, 113.

[15] ibid. 140.

[16] Cited by Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 2.

[17] Manassah ben Israel wrote *Vindiciae Judaeorum* to Oliver Cromwell, arguing for the readmission of the Jews to England.

[18] English translation in Eva Jospe (ed. and trans.), *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 99-100. A complete translation by M. Samuels was published in his English translation of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* (London, 1838), vol. 1.

suspicious of science, and opposed to much of modern culture.[19] Such Orthodoxy, as Kellner well knows, affirms as absolute truths many traditional assumptions which, when taken literally, are patently false, for example, some of the astronomical assumptions which are the basis of Jewish calendrical calculations; biblical and rabbinic statements regarding the age of the universe, or regarding medicine, or precluding the evidence of evolution, archeology and Bible criticism. Had Kellner expressed admiration for the disciplined traditional Jewish way of life, and appreciation of observant Jews' dedication and commitment to the Torah and to study, often entailing personal hardship and demanding sacrifice, he would have been on far safer ground than his attribution of absolute truth to Orthodoxy in a book devoted, in no small measure, to an admirable attack on false contemporary Orthodox dogmatics.

Finally, at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem (July-August, 2005), Kellner devoted much of his lecture to a critique of my thesis of pluralism, on two grounds: first (as we have seen above), he regards pluralism as inherently absurd, theoretically self-refuting, and essentially relativistic; second, he maintains that there are no precedents for such pluralism in traditional Jewish thought, since in his view "Judaism teaches truth and…there is one absolute truth" (cited above).

What follows, then, is my response to these challenges. First, however, it is important to note that pluralism is frequently equated with relativism, as it is in Ratzinger's *Dominus Iesus*, in the question posed to me in Rome, and in statements by Kellner. In my understanding, pluralism cannot be equated with relativism. Plural understandings of the truth, or even plural truths, are not the same as no truth, and they are certainly not the same as no moral standards. As Maimonides pointed out (in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:2 and in his *Treatise on Logic*, ch. 8), moral judgments do not deal with what is theoretically true and false (which he regarded as intelligibles, Arabic: *ma`qulat*; Hebrew: *muskalot*), but with practical determinations (which he regarded as conventional or "generally accepted" propositions, Arabic: *mashhurat*; Hebrew: *mefursamot*) of what is good and proper or evil and improper. To confuse theoretical pluralism with moral (and other) relativism is thus to blur this important distinction.[20]

Irving "Yitz" Greenberg also argues admirably for maintaining this distinction:

Pluralism means more than accepting or even affirming the other. It entails recognizing the blessings in the other's existence, because it balances one's own position and brings all of us closer to the ultimate goal. Even when we are right in our own position, the other who contradicts our position may be our corrective or our check against going to excess…Pluralism is not relativism, for we hold on to

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[19] By "literalist" I do not mean corporealist, i.e. that they take biblical anthropomorphisms literally, but rather that their reading of the Bible is shaped exclusively by an exclusive reliance on rabbinic tradition (or on certain aspects of that tradition), and in turn that their reading of the Rabbis is literalist and uncritical, even when the Rabbis' own non-literal and midrashic reading of Scripture or other views are implausible. Such literalist reading of the Rabbis is strongly criticized by Maimonides in his Commentary to the Mishnah, "Pereq Ḥeleq" (Sanhedrin, ch. 10).

[20] Irving "Yitz" Greenberg has written: "To my great frustration, the Orthodox failed to distinguish between pluralism and relativism; to my failure, I could not persuade them of the essential difference between these positions – in other words, that one could uphold the authority of tradition while making room for other religious systems." (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*), 11. I share Greenberg's frustration, but it's not only the Orthodox Jews who fail to make this important distinction.

our absolutes; however, we make room for others' as well.[21]

Relativism…is the loss of capacity to affirm any standards. But the deepest religious response is pluralism – the recognition that there are plural absolute standards that can live and function together, even when they conflict. The deepest insight of pluralism is that dignity, truth and power function best when they are pluralized, e.g., divided and distributed, rather than centralized or absolutized . . . The essential difference between pluralism and relativism is that pluralism is based on the principle that there still is an absolute truth…Pluralism is an absolutism that has come to recognize its limitations.[22]

Unfortunately, Greenberg's merely stating that "we hold on to our absolutes" does not explain how to reconcile claims to absolute truth with pluralism. If one's own position is held to be absolutely true, it may need a moral "check" against practical excess, but why should absolute truth require theoretical correction? Pluralism is not relativism, on that Greenberg and I agree – but how can it be compatible with absolutist claims? Does not Greenberg's vision of "divided and distributed, rather than centralized or absolutized" truth contradict the "absolute truth" which he affirms? How are we to understand Greenberg's assertion that "pluralism is an absolutism that recognizes that an absolute truth/value need not be absolutely right to be absolute"?[23]

As we shall see below, over two centuries ago Moses Mendelssohn advocated a clearer and more consistent and progressive form of pluralism that avoided such problematical claims to absolute truth, or that Judaism is "absolutely the best" religion.[24] I shall, therefore, argue that claims to absolute truth are not merely morally dangerous, but theoretically meaningless.

Returning to allegations of relativism, however, the truly meaningful question for me is not whether pluralism may necessarily entail some degree of relativism in general, but what kind of relativism. I cannot imagine that anyone is bothered by a pluralism of flavors of ice cream, if it should prove to be the case that one's favorite taste is both subjective and relative. As a Jew, what concerns me most is moral relativism, which implies that there are no meaningfully binding standards (however derived) on all people. The experience of 20th century totalitarianism, and the *Shoah* in particular, should teach us the obvious dangers of such a position, and the Nuremburg Trials correctly, from my perspective (as the child of a German Jewish family, many of whose members were murdered by the Nazis), established international recognition that there are certain norms to which all people can and should be held, regardless of whether they were following what their country posited to be legal orders.

Therefore, it seems to me that if, despite what I think, it should prove correct that pluralism inevitably entails some

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[21] Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, 196.

[22] ibid, 201-203.

[23] ibid, 205. This tension (which I regard as unresolved) in Greenberg's thought between pluralism and absolutism, which may prove inevitable in much of progressive yet faithful religious thought, also characterizes much of Nicolaus of Cusa's "On the Peace of Faith" ("De Pace Fidei"), referred to above, note 3. A consistent theme in the essay is the need to avoid conflict and to respect religious diversity, which "may bring an increase in

devotion" (p. 233), and to tolerate different rites (p. 268). At the same time, since all the diverse religions "presuppose" a common, single religion and wisdom (pp. 236-237; 272), ultimately "all diversity of religion ought to be brought into one orthodox faith…The Lord has taken pity on His people and agreed to the plan to lead all diversity of religions through mutual agreement of all men harmoniously back to a single, henceforth inviolable religon." (p. 235)

[24] See the discussion below, and note 69.

degree of relativism, we would then be obliged to differentiate between moral relativism, which may entail clear and immediate practical dangers, and various kinds of epistemological relativism, especially in terms of what people think about God, which may have its theoretical errors, but does not present an existential danger. Moral relativism affects interpersonal matters (*bein adam le-ḥ avero*), whereas epistemological relativism (if it be relativism at all, rather than pluralism) regarding diverse understandings of God refers to extremely personal and subjective questions between the individual and God (*bein adam la-maqom*).

As a Jew, I am, therefore, far less troubled by at least some degree of epistemological relativism, since even people who claim revelation can readily admit that their human understanding of divine truth is limited and partial, and reflects cultural and other influences, thus acknowledging a limited epistemological relativism. Nevertheless, I recognize that my position may be easier for a Jew to affirm than for a Christian, given the relatively greater emphasis in Judaism on deed, which does not necessarily entail abstract truth claims, and the relatively greater emphasis in Christianity on creed, which necessarily forces one to deal with truth claims. Whatever "salvation" or "justification" mean, the traditional Jewish notions that Israel must live according to the 613 commandments of the Torah, and that the righteous gentiles who also, like Israel, have "a portion in the world to come," are those who observe the universal "seven commandments of the children of Noah,"[25] clearly have a behavioral emphasis, with truth claims playing at most a minor role in the scheme of Jewish attitudes towards non-Jews. Conversely, the classical Pauline notion of justification by

faith clearly places truth claims at the focal point of Christian theological concern, and together with belief in "one way" may well make it far more difficult for a Christian to relegate epistemological relativism to the back rows of the debate on pluralism.

As for Kellner's argument that there are no precedents for pluralism in Jewish thought, even if that were correct, the lack of precedent would not invalidate pluralism in principle. Kellner surely would not reject democracy on the grounds that it is derived from Athenian and not from biblical or later Jewish thought. As I shall show, however, there are in fact ample precedents for pluralism in Jewish sources.

As I attempt to respond to Kellner's challenges, that pluralism makes no inherent sense and is self-refuting, and that there are no precedents in traditional Jewish thought for my position, I am guided by a twofold belief: on a theoretical level, that claims to "one absolute truth" are inherently meaningless; and on a practical level, that such spiritual exclusivity constitutes an existential danger to the peace of the world, especially in the era of the "global village" and increasingly widespread weapons of mass destruction. So long as religions continue to compete with each other in their exclusivistic claims, they will not be able serve as an effective force for peace and cooperation, but rather will perpetuate their all too frequent desecration of God's name and affront to human dignity.

Toleration versus Pluralism: Alexander Altman and Avi Sagi

In his 1957 lecture before the Council of Christians and Jews in London, my teacher Alexander Altmann discussed

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[25] See the discussion of these points in my "Chosenness in Judaism: Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity," 178-180 and the references in notes 15-19, and in "The Concept of the Chosen People: An Interpretation," 130-131, and the references in notes 15-20.

"Tolerance and the Jewish Tradition."[26] In Altmann's analysis, historically Jews in the biblical and rabbinic periods found ways to tolerate non-Jews, while rejecting internal toleration of Jewish dissent. He then argued that Jews and Christians today meet on secular ground, while their theologies remain mutually exclusive. Therefore, he concludes, although theologically Jews and Christians cannot tolerate each other, they need each other for a common stand in the face of contemporary "virulent paganism." While theology thus divides, religion, which is broader than theology, can bring the two groups together by emulating God's love.[27]

Altmann's essay, of course, was written prior to the radical changes in Christian-Jewish relationships since Vatican II, and could not take into account later developments. He questioned the possibility of theological toleration; fifty years later, we face the question of whether we can move from mere toleration to a pluralistic acceptance of each other.

More recently, Avi Sagi of Bar Ilan University has characterized different grades of toleration and pluralism.[28] We tolerate what we reject, and view the tolerated position as error. In short, we tolerate the person, not the idea. By contrast, in pluralism we see the other position as valid and possessing value. A "weak pluralism" is based on the skeptical view that there is one truth, but that, because of our fallibility, we have no way to discover it except through the confrontation of opposing ideas. The weak pluralist is thus

not sure that he has the truth, as opposed to the person who tolerates dissent, because he is certain of his truth.[29] "Strong pluralism," on the other hand, does not affirm only a temporary value of opposing views leading to ultimate truth, but regards different views as having inherent value of their own. Such pluralism thus adopts a measure of relativism.[30] In Sagi's analysis, weak pluralism can coexist with religious authority, because it adopts only a hypothetical epistemological relativism, but strong pluralism has generally been understood as presenting an impossible challenge to religion, by requiring that it give up its claims to religious truth, which it cannot do.[31] Sagi concludes, nevertheless, by calling for a revolution of attitudes, if not of halakhic practice. There is a need for pluralism in western society; in practical terms, most of western society is already pluralistic; and pluralism follows from the subjectivity of the religious experience. Sagi therefore calls for an "intellectual golden rule": let others have their own experience and recognize its value.[32]

It seems to me that the opponents of pluralism fail to take into account the subjective nature of faith and the religious experience, to which Sagi points. The difference between faith and knowledge lies precisely in the fact that we know something which we can demonstrate and for which we have evidence, whereas we believe, rather than know, something to be true precisely when we lack such demonstration and evidence and yet affirm it as true.[33] Since faith therefore

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[26] Alexander Altmann, "Tolerance and the Jewish Tradition", the 1957 Robert Waley Cohen Memorial Lecture (London: The Council of Christians and Jews); Hebrew trans. David Singer in A. Altmann, *Panim Shel Yahadut* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1983), 217-232.

[27] ibid, 19.

[28] Avi Sagi, "Ha-Dat Ha-Yehudit: Sovlanut ve-Efsharut ha-Pluralism" in `Iyyun 43 (1994), 175-200.

[29] ibid, 184.

[30] ibid, 185-186.

[31] ibid, 194-195.

[32] ibid, 198-200.

[33] Kellner's approach to faith is that faith involves trust, which should find expression in behavior, whereas knowledge involves the acquiescence to the truth of certain claims, which do not necessitate any specific behavior. Kellner identifies his approach with that of Maimonides. Regardless of whether Kellner is correct that this is Maimonides' understanding of the

deals with affirmations which are unproven and unprovable (as opposed to knowledge), it is inherently subjective, not objective, and culturally relative. At least a weak form of pluralism would seem inevitably to follow from such subjectivity and cultural relativity.

Subjectivity and Cultural Relativity in Revelation

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. Commenting on the peculiar phrase, "all the people saw the voices" of the revelation at Sinai (Ex 20:15), the Midrash Rabba on Exodus[34] picks up on the plural *qolot* ("voices" or "sounds"):

It says "All the people saw the voices." It does not say "voice" here but "voices." Rabbi Yoḥanan said, The

[divine] voice went out and was divided into seventy voices, into seventy languages, so that all the nations could hear, each nation hearing it in its own national language...Come and see how the voice would go out to each Israelite according to his capacity (*koaḥ*, literally "power"), the elders according to their capacity, the youth according to their capacity, the children according to their capacity, infants according to their capacity, and the women according to their capacity, and even Moses according to his capacity...Therefore it says, "The voice of the Lord is in power (*koaḥ*). It does not say "in his power" but "in power," in the power [i.e., capacity] of each individual.

Revelation, in short, according to this rabbinic view, was not absolute or monolithic; it had to be adjusted to the subjective capacity of each individual to understand, and to the relative cultures of the various nations.[35]

Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Limitations of Revelation

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), a prominent Bible exegete, grammarian, poet and philosopher argued[36] against the traditional rabbinic view that both versions of the

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nature of faith (and Kellner's reading is not necessarily supported by Maimonides' insistence in *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:35 that the common people should accept on authority certain basic beliefs), Kellner's approach reflects that of Martin Buber, who contrasted two types of faith: Jewish faith, "the fact that I trust someone, without being able to offer sufficient reasons for my trust in him;" and Christian faith, "likewise, without being able to give a sufficient reason, I acknowledge a thing to be true." (Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. N. Goldhawk [New York, 1961]), Foreword, p. 7. Moses Mendelssohn makes a similar point, that *emunah* means trust, in *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, trans. and ed. by Alfred Jospe (New York, 1969), 71; cf. the translation by Allan Arkush, with Introduction and Commentary by A. Altmann (Hanover, 1983), 100. In any event, as Buber admits more candidly than does Kellner, even a behavioral, rather than cognitive understanding of *emunah* still involves an attitude "without being able to offer sufficient reasons for my trust," i.e., there is no demonstrative evidence to justify the trust.

[34] Midrash Exodus Rabba 5:9. My English translation. In the English translation by S.M. Lehrman (London: Soncino Press, 1939) this passage is found on pp. 86-88.

[35] Kellner argues that I'm reading into the text views its authors would have rejected, because all they meant was that the same text can be understood on different levels, just as the same geometry can be taught to graduate students or to school children on different levels. But is graduate-level, advanced non-Euclidean geometry really the same geometry as that taught in elementary or middle schools? At what point is a critical understanding of Scripture or other religious sources merely quantitatively more advanced than what children are taught, as opposed to qualitatively different?

[36] Ibn Ezra, Long (i.e. standard) commentary to Ex 20:1.

Decalogue (Ex 20 and Dt 5) were revealed simultaneously.[37] After listing in detail all the differences between the two versions, Ibn Ezra explained that many of these differences (especially in the commandment regarding the Sabbath) are substantive, not merely stylistic. No person is capable of understanding two different notions spoken simultaneously, and in such a case would understand neither of them. A simultaneous revelation of both versions would thus have been incomprehensible and meaningless.[38]

It is impossible that "remember" and "observe" [the Sabbath] were spoken simultaneously, even by a miracle...How could many verses be miraculously spoken simultaneously, when they do not have the same meaning?... Reason cannot tolerate these notions... And if we were to say that God's speech is not like human speech, how could Israel have understood what God said? For if a person would hear "remember" and "observe" simultaneously, he would not understand either one.

For Ibn Ezra, the limitations on revelation are thus imposed not from above, namely on God as the speaker, but from below, namely by the limited capacity of the people hearing it. In other words, it is meaningless to discuss the absolute nature of revealed truth because of its divine origin. Successful communication – whether divine revelation or a radio broadcast – must be effectively received as well as

broadcast, and the limited capacity of the human receiver is what necessarily subjectivizes and relativizes revelation.

Al-Farabi: Religious versus Philosophical Language

Abu Naṣr Muḥammad Al-Farabi (870-950), one of the greatest early Islamic philosophers, who had an immense influence on Maimonides,[39] applied Platonic political philosophy to revealed religion, and identified the philosopher-king with the prophet. In his *Political Regime*, Al-Farabi argued that there is one reality, but that there are many images or reflections of reality. Therefore, there can be many religions, because each nation has its own ways to represent these images of reality, although not all the ways are equally excellent.[40]

Because it is difficult for the multitude to comprehend these things themselves as they are, the attempt was made to teach them these things in other ways, which are the ways of imitation. Hence these things are imitated for each group or nation through the matters that are best known to them; and it may very well be that what is best known to the one may not be the best known to the other.[41]

Similarly, in his *Attainment of Happiness*, Al-Farabi suggested that philosophy deals with demonstrative

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[37] B.T. Rosh Ha-Shanah 27a (*inter alia*), *zakhor ve-shamor be-dibbur eḥad ne'emru*, "'Remember' and 'Observe' [the Sabbath] were said as one statement."

[38] My English translation. Ibn Ezra concludes that the version in Exodus, where it says that "God spoke all of these things" (Ex 20:1) is the actual record of the revelation, whereas the version in Deuteronomy, where Moses says "I stood between God and you at that time, to tell you the word of the Lord" (Dt 5:5) is the paraphrase by Moses, 40 years later.

[39] For a discussion of Al-Farabi's influence on Maimonides, see Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophical Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*" in Pines' English translation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), LVII-CXXXIV.

[40] Al-Farabi, *The Political Regime*. English translation by F.M. Najjar in Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 31-57.

[41] Ibid., 40-41.

knowledge of beings, whereas religion entails assent, secured through persuasion, to images of things.

> If he perceives their ideas themselves with his intellect, and his assent to them is by means of certain demonstration, then the science that comprises their cognitions is philosophy. But if they are known through similitudes that imitate them, and assent to what is imagined of them is caused by persuasive methods, then the ancients call what comprises those cognitions religion ...Therefore, according to the ancients, religion is an imitation of philosophy... In everything of which philosophy gives an account based on intellectual perception or conception, religion gives an account based on imagination.[42]

To translate Al-Farabi's theory into our contemporary terminology, the language of science is discursive, whereas 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.[43]

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[42] Al-Farabi, *The Attainment of Happiness*. English translation by Muhsin Mahdi *in Medieval Political Philosophy*, #55, 44-45.

[43] This does not mean that Al-Farabi is positing a "double truth" theory, in the sense of thirteenth-century Latin Averroists at the University of Paris, namely that reason and revelation are two separate and autonomous realms of truth. Al-Farabi is suggesting that the truth can be expressed scientifically, in discursive, rational terms for intellectuals. This is the realm of philosophy. The same truths need to be expressed, for the common people, in terms they are capable of understanding, namely by "similitudes" deriving from the imagination, which "imitate" those truths; this is the realm of religion. On the "double truth" theory, see the discussion and references in my "Faith and Reason: The Controversy Over Philosophy in Jewish History," in *La Storia della Filosofia Ebraica*, ed. Irene Kajon (Milan: *Archivio di Filosofia*, 1993), 99-135.

Maimonides: "The Torah Speaks According to Human Language

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) was profoundly indebted to Al-Farabi, especially his identification of the prophet of revealed religion with the Platonic philosopher-king. Whereas the philosopher has a perfected intellect and the politician has a perfected imagination (which enables him to lead effectively, by appealing to popular emotion), the prophet is perfect in both respects.[44] Although Maimonides emphasizes the unique rank of the prophecy of Moses, which did not entail imagination,[45] he also insists that "the Torah speaks according to human language" (דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם),[46] in other words, that the Torah had to employ anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language to accommodate the primitive understanding of the ancient Israelites. These two positions, that the prophecy of Moses did not entail imagination, but that the Torah had to use primitive language and mythological imagery, are not necessarily contradictory. In the first case, Maimonides is referring to Moses' own experience of revelation, in which there was no involvement of imagination, whereas in the second case he is referring to how Moses subsequently conveyed those abstract truths to the people in imaginative terms they could understand.

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[44] Cf. *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:37.

[45] Cf. *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:36, 2:45.

[46] *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:26. The phrase occurs, *inter alia*, in B.T. Berakhot 31b. Whereas Rabbi Akiva would interpret (*darash*) the significance of every word, and even letters, of Torah as significant, Rabbi Yishma'el's hermeneutic was based on the principle that the Torah speaks according to human language. Maimonides was not the first medieval philosopher to apply this hermeneutic principle philosophically, in the sense that the Torah had to adapt itself to the primitive understanding of the masses. Cf. Baḥya ibn Paqudah, *Duties of the Hearts* 1:10.

Maimonides' political theory thus again forces us to separate historical revelation from claims of absolute truth, since even the Torah had to adapt its method of expression to limited and primitive human understanding. The Torah's corporealist method of expression is not only frequently misleading – thus the "perplexed" student for whom Maimonides' wrote his *Guide of the Perplexed* – but actually dangerous, when people take literally corporealist attributes which are themselves false, because in Maimonides' view, a person who believes in a corporeal God is worse than an idolator.[47]

The Possibility of Multiple Revelations: Netanel Ibn Al-Fayyumi

Maimonides, in several places, most notably in the ninth of his "Thirteen Principles," rejected the possibility that any subsequent revelation could abrogate the Torah.[48] But what of revelations to other nations that would not abrogate the Torah? Joseph Albo's *Book of Principles* (*Sefer Ha-`Iqqarim*) (c. 1425) discusses "divine laws" besides the Torah that were revealed to prophets, reflecting changing human needs (like a patient whose changing condition requires revised prescriptions), but these revelations were all to pre-Sinaitic prophets, such as Adam, Noah and Abraham,

and Albo did not regard Christianity and Islam to be divinely revealed religions.[49]

Conversely, the *Garden of the Intellects* (*Bustan al-`Uqul*) of Netanel ibn al-Fayyumi (Yemen, c. 1165)[50] explicitly discusses multiple revelations both before and after the revelation of the Torah. These post-Sinaitic revelations, however, do not abrogate the Torah, which will not be abrogated even in the messianic era:

Nothing prevents God from sending unto His world whomsoever He wishes, whenever He wishes, since the world of holiness sends forth emanations unceasingly from the light world to the coarse world, to liberate the souls from the sea of matter – in the world of nature – and from destruction in the fires of Hell. Even before the revelation of the Law He sent prophets to the nations, as our sages of blessed memory explain, "Seven prophets prophesied to the nations of the world before the giving of the Torah: Laban, Jethro, Balaam, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar."[51] And even after its revelation nothing prevented Him from sending to them whom He wished, that the world might not remain without religion. The prophets declared that the other nations would serve Him from the rising of the sun to the setting thereof: "For from

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[47] *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:36.

[48] The Arabic term Maimonides uses, *naskh* (abrogation), is a technical term in Islam. Since the Qur'an was given over a period of years, a later revelation to Muḥammad could abrogate an earlier revelation (cf. Qur'an, Sura 2:106), just as in general, Muḥammad, as the last and greatest prophets, and as the "seal of the prophets" (cf. Qur'an, Sura 33:40), could abrogate prior revelations to earlier prophets. Maimonides' use of the Islamic term as a polemic against Islam is thus not accidental.

[49] Irving "Yitz" Greenberg (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, p. 57) refers to what he understands to be divine revelations and other nations' access to God, in Gn 14:18-20; Nm 22-24; Am 9:7; Mi 4:5).

[50] Cf. David Levine, *The Bustan Al-Ukul by Nathanel ibn Al-Fayyumi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), Judeo-Arabic text and English translation. Judeo-Arabic text with Hebrew translation by Yosef Kafiḥ (Jerusalem, 1954).

[51] The reference is to T.B. Bava Batra 15a, where, however, the list differs slightly: Balaam, his father, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu.

the rising of the sun to the setting thereof great is my name among the nations." (Mal 1:11).[52]

This leads Netanel to explicit religious pluralism:

Know that God commanded that all the people should serve according to the Law; and He permitted to every people something which he forbade to others, and He forbade to them something which He permitted to others, for He knoweth what is best for His creatures and what is adapted to them, as the skilled physician understands his patients.[53]

Netanel then cites the Qur'an (Sura Ibrahim 14:4): "He sends a prophet to every people according to their language."[54] We thus have in Netanel's *Garden of the Intellects* what is probably the clearest statement of religious pluralism in medieval Jewish thought, reflecting pluralistic trends in the Isma'ili thought of the "Brethren of Purity" (*Ikhwan al-Safa*).[55]

Sa`adiah Gaon and "The Community of Monotheists"

One might, of course, dismiss Netanel ibn al-Fayyumi as a relatively insignificant and exceptional figure in medieval Jewish thought. One cannot thus dismiss Sa`adiah Gaon (882-942), the first medieval Jewish philosopher, whose *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (*Kitab al-Amanat w'al-I`tiqadat*; *Sefer ha-Emunot veha-De`ot*) established a whole tradition of Jewish philosophizing. Sa`adiah does not discuss multiple revelations, but he does discuss a type of religious truth transcending Judaism.

In the Introduction (#5) to his book, after discussing empirical, rational and deductive sources of knowledge, which are all clearly universal, he states:

As for ourselves, the community of monotheists (*jama`at al-muwaḥadin*), we hold these three sources of knowledge to be genuine. To them, however, we add a fourth source …the validity of authentic tradition (*al-khabar al-ṣadiq*)…

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[52] *Bustan al-`Uqul*, ch. 6, Levine ed., 103-104; Kafiḥ ed., 114-115.

[53] *Bustan al-`Uqul*, ch. 6, Levine ed., 107; Kafiḥ ed., 118-119. Netanel's arguments have sometimes been called relativistic, by Y. Tzvi Langermann and others (see below), although Langermann clearly refers to it as "religious relativism" and not as moral relativism. It seems to me that what our text is referring to is not relativism in the moral sense, i.e., that there are no moral standards however derived, but pluralism in the religious sense, that different groups have diverse ritual requirements which only apply within that group, because of their particular conditions. It is only in the sense that the rituals differ according to particular conditions that one can suggest some kind of "relativism" in the ritual practices, just as the physician's prescriptions are "relative" to patients' conditions and needs, but we do not usually regard a diabetic's need for insulin, which would endanger a non-diabetic, as constituting "relativism." Similarly, the ritual dietary restrictions of *kashrut* in the Torah apply only to Jews, and those of the Book of Mormon apply only to Latter Day Saints, just as in a civil context citizens of one country salute only the flag of their country, and not of other countries. This is how I understand Netanel's text, as referring to such pluralism and not to relativism.

[54] *Bustan al-`Uqul*, ch. 6, Levine ed., 109; Kafiḥ ed., 121.

[55] Cf. S.M. Stern, "Fatimid Propaganda Among the Jews", pp. 85-86, cited by Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Some Astrological Themes in the Thought of Abraham ibn Ezra", in I. Twersky and J. Harris, eds., *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 72 and note 121. Langermann refers here to Netanel's "religious relativism". On the Brethren of Purity, see note 3, above. For an example of religious pluralism in the Ikhwan al-Safa, see Lenn Evan Goodman, *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, p. 194: In response to the King of the Jinn's question, "Why do you disagree in your notions, sects and creeds if your Lord is one?" the Persian spokesman says: "Because religions, doctrines, sects are only different paths of approach, different means and avenues, but the Goal we seek is one. From whatever quarter we seek to encounter Him, God is there."

> This type of knowledge…corroborates for us the validity of the first three sources of knowledge.[56]

This type of knowledge (which can also be translated as "reliable report" or "reliable tradition") has generally been understood by scholars, such as my teacher Shlomo Pines, as "drawn only from the Jewish prophetic books" and as "intended solely for the benefit of the Jewish community." Pines also interprets "the community of monotheists" exclusively as the Jews.[57] This view, however, needs to be modified. Sa`adiah cannot have denied the monotheistic nature at least of Islam (if not of Christianity), since he follows the Mu`tazilah Kalam arguments for creation and the existence and unity of God. His argument with Christian Trinitarianism, which follows his discussion of essential attributes,[58] and not his refutation of dualism and polytheism, and therefore contextually implies that Christianity is an erroneous form of monotheism and not polytheism. Moreover, Sa`adiah later refers in the plural to "the communities of the monotheists" (*ma`ashir al-muwaḥadin*)[59] when discussing Christian Trinitarianism. So Sa`adiah's understanding of "the community of monotheists" cannot be limited to the Jewish

people, and must have a broader connotation. The fourth type of knowledge, authentic tradition, which is possessed by the "community of monotheists," must also, therefore, be shared by non-Jews (as becomes even more obvious by his example, that without such knowledge a person would not even be able to know who his father is). In Sa`adiah's usage, authentic tradition is by no means identical with revelation, although at least in the case of the Jews it is based on and related to revelation. Nevertheless, we have here at least an implicit, if not explicit, pluralistic conception of religious truth in the thought of one of the most influential of the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages.

This universalistic reading of Sa`adiah's "community of monotheists" is further reinforced in the usage of later Jewish philosophers. For example, Baḥya ibn Paqudah's *Duties of the Hearts* 1:1-2 refers to "the people of monotheism," where the distinction is not between Jew and non-Jew but between varying degrees of comprehension of people who affirm God's unity. Judah Ha-Levi's *Kuzari* 1:4 also refers to "monotheists" in a non-Jewish context, when the Christian spokesman says to the Khazar king: "for we are truly monotheists, although the Trinity appears on our tongues." Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:53 has: "We, the community of true monotheists", where the category is philosophical, not parochial, and refers to those who have a correct philosophical understanding of the divine attributes; a similar usage is found in *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:75.

If my universalistic understanding of "the community of monotheists" in Sa`adiah Gaon, Baḥya ibn Paqudah, Judah Ha-Levi and Maimonides is correct, the universal nature of this type of truth implies at least a degree of pluralism, for the simple reason that the truth takes different forms in

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[56] *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 16; Arabic text with Hebrew trans. by Yosef Kafiḥ (Jerusalem: Sura, 1970), 14. For a complete discussion of this issue, cf. my "Sa`adiah Gaon and Moses Mendelssohn: Pioneers of Jewish Philosophy" in Raphael Jospe, ed., *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Associated University Presses, 1997), 37-59; and my *"Ha-Hagadah Ha-Ne'emenet Shel Rabbi Sa`adiah Gaon: Mi Hem Qehal Ha-Meyaḥadim?"* in *Da`at* 41 (Summer, 1998) 5-17; and "Additional Note" in *Da`at* 42 (Winter, 1999), IX.

[57] S. Pines, "A Study of the Impact of Indian, Mainly Buddhist, Thought on Some Aspects of Kalam Doctrines" in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17 (1994): 182-203.

[58] *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* 2:4.

[59] ibid. 2:5.

diverse cultures, all of which are, nevertheless, acknowledged to be true monotheism.

All of these cases support my claim, in response to Kellner, that there are ample precedents in Jewish thought, both rabbinic and philosophic, for pluralistic and inclusive understanding of religious truth, and that the concept of revelation need not, and indeed cannot, be understood to mean exclusive possession of absolute truth, since even the revelation of the Torah at Sinai had to be adjusted to subjective human understanding and relatively to diverse national cultures.

On Cultural Relativism in Conceiving of God

The insight that our very conceptions of God and the universe are culturally relativistic is not new. The pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes of Colophone (570 BCE – 475 BCE) already made the point:[60]

170.   But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.
171.   The Ethiopians says that their gods are snub-nosed and black; the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.
172.   But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the work that men do, horses would draw the forms [Greek: ideas] of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle,

and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.

In the seventeenth century, Baruch (Benedict de) Spinoza continued in the same humorous vein:

Let us imagine…a little worm, living in the blood…This little worm would live in the blood, in the same way as we live in a part of the universe, and would consider each part of blood, not as a part, but as a whole.[61]

Some years later, Spinoza went even further:

I believe that, if a triangle could speak, it would say, in like manner, that God is eminently triangular, while a circle would say that the divine nature is eminently circular. Thus each would ascribe to God its own attributes, would assume itself to be like God, and look on everything else as ill-shaped.[62]

Moses Mendelssohn and Religious Pluralism

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), on whose thought Spinoza exercised a decided, albeit frequently negative influence, was the first Jewish philosopher to address the question of the compatibility of a traditional loyalty to the Torah (which Spinoza had rejected), with a modern, pluralistic vision of religious cooperation in the liberal state.[63] Mendelssohn

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[60] Greek fragments and English trans. in G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 168-169. Franz Rosenzweig refers to Xenophanes and Spinoza in his article "Anthropomorphism" written in 1928-1929 for the original German *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. The Hebrew translation by Yehosua Amir may be found in Rosenzweig's *Naharayim* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960), 31-40; the specific reference is on p. 38.

[61] Letter #15 (1665?) to Oldenburg, in R.H.M. Elwes English trans. of *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* (New York: Dover, 1955), vol. 2, p. 291.

[62] Letter #60, to Hugo Boxel (1674), in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. 2, p. 386.

[63] I discuss Mendelssohn's theories at length in "Moses Mendelssohn: A Medieval Modernist", in *Sepharad in Ashkenaz: Medieval Knowledge and 18th Century Jewish Enlightened Discourse*, ed. R. Fontaine, A. Schatz, I.

objected to classical Christian exclusivity of salvation and to Locke's theory of toleration on both philosophic and Jewish grounds, and proposed, rather, religious pluralism.

On the first issue, Christian claims of exclusivity of salvation, Mendelssohn wrote in favor of greater respect for dissenting opinion:[64]

It is my good fortune to count among my friends many an excellent man who is not of my faith…I enjoy the pleasure of his company and feel enriched by it. But at no time has my heart whispered to me, "What a pity that this beautiful soul should be lost."…Only that man will be troubled by such regrets who believes that there is no salvation outside his church…Some of my countrymen hold views and convictions which, although I consider them wrong, do belong to a higher order of theoretical principles. They are not harmful, because they have little or no relationship to the practical concerns of daily life. Yet they frequently constitute the foundation on which people have erected their systems of morality and social order and are of great importance to them. To question such notions publicly merely because we consider them biased or erroneous would be like removing the foundation stones of a building in order to examine the soundness of its structure.

Such religious exclusivism, in Mendelssohn's view, is thus both theoretically wrong and practically dangerous.

Locke's theory of toleration differentiates between the respective realms of state (which is interested in the temporal affairs of this world) and religion (which is interested in the eternal affairs of the world to come). Such a differentiation between the temporal and the eternal, Mendelssohn argues, simply does not hold up either theoretically or practically. It fails theoretically because the temporal is part of the eternal and the eternal is an extension of the temporal. It fails practically because people's behavior in this world is predicated, at least to some extent, on their beliefs regarding the world to come. Instead, Mendelssohn applies the traditional rabbinic differentiation between those matters which are between a person and another person (*bein adam le-ḥavero*), which he assigns to the state, and those matters which are purely between a person and God (*bein adam la-maqom*) and do not involve other people, which he assigns to religion. Furthermore, Locke had argued pragmatically that the state is incapable of determining which religion is true, and must, therefore, tolerate dissent and variety.

Mendelssohn goes beyond such a pragmatic view of toleration and affirms the inherent value and desirability of religious pluralism. Diversity is part of the divine plan for humanity. Addressing Christian rulers, he concludes his *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*:[65]

Dear Brothers, you are well-meaning. But do not let yourselves be deceived. To belong to this omnipresent shepherd, it is not necessary for the entire flock to graze on one pasture or to enter and leave the master's house through just one door. It would be neither in accord with the shepherd's wishes nor conducive to the growth of his flock.[66]

Zwiep (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2007), 107-140.

[64] Open Letter to Lavater, 12 December 1769, in Alfred Jospe, ed. and trans., *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings* by Moses Mendelssohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 118-119.

[65] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, ed. and trans. Alfred Jospe, 107-110.

[66] Although the claim of Jesus to be Israel's shepherd can be seen as referring back to Ez 37:24, it seems to me that Mendelssohn here deliberately employs the image of multiple doors for the sheep, to counter

… A union of faiths, if it were ever to come about, could have only the most disastrous consequences for reason and freedom of conscience…If the goal of this universal delusion were to be realized, I am afraid man's barely liberated mind would once again be confined behind bars…Brothers, if you care for true godliness, let us not pretend that conformity exists where diversity is obviously the plan and goal of Providence. Not one among us thinks and feels exactly like his fellowman. Why, then, should we deceive each other with lies? It is sad enough that we are doing this in our daily relations, in conversations that are of no particular importance. But why also in matters which concern our temporal and eternal welfare, our very destiny? Why should we use masks to make ourselves unrecognizable to each other in the most important concerns of life, when God has given each of us his own distinctive face for some good reason?...A union of faiths is not tolerance. It is the very opposite.

Mendelssohn had long and consistently held to such pluralistic views, rejecting the exclusivistic claims made by any religion. Early in 1770 he wrote to Prince Karl-Wilhelm about liberal Christian reformers:[67]

They must not base their system… on the hypothesis that Judaism and, even more so, natural religion, are inadequate means to ensure man's salvation. Since all men must have been destined by the Creator to attain eternal bliss, no particular religion can have an exclusive claim to truth. This thesis, I dare to submit, might serve as a criterion of truth in all religious matters. A revelation claiming to show

man the only way to salvation cannot be true, for it is not in harmony with the intent of the all-merciful Creator.

Mendelssohn's consistency in this regard is evident in his explicit application of his pluralistic principles to Judaism, not only to Christianity and to other religions. In another letter written in 1770 he differentiated between internal, natural religion, which is universal, and involves basic, demonstrable truths all people should accept on a rational basis, and a pluralistic variety of external positive religions:[68]

Worship, however, as everyone knows, can be private as well as public, internal as well as external, and one does well to differentiate between the two. The internal worship of the Jew is not based on any principles except those of natural religion. To spread these is, indeed, incumbent upon us…Our external worship, however, is in no way meant to address itself to others, since it consists of rules and prescriptions that are related to specific persons, times and circumstances. I grant that we believe that our religion is the best, because we believe it to be divinely inspired. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this premise that it is absolutely the best. It is the best religion for ourselves and our descendants, the best for certain times, circumstances and conditions.[69]

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the exclusivism of Jesus' statements: "I am the door of the sheep…I am the door, if anyone enters by me, he will be saved." (Jn 10:7-9).

[67] English trans. by Eva Jospe in *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from his Writings* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 116-117.

[68] English trans. by Alfred Jospe in *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, p. 134.

[69] Mendelssohn thus anticipates by over two centuries what Irving "Yitz" Greenberg states: "Thus any truth may speak absolutely to me and others, yet it is not intended for others who may be spoken to by other revelations and chosen for another sector of service." (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, p. 204). Mendelssohn wisely avoids, however, the trap into which Greenberg falls, because Mendelssohn denies that Judaism "is absolutely the best," whereas Greenberg still claims absolute truth.

For Mendelssohn, pluralism of positive religions is thus a theoretical desideratum and a practical necessity.

Kant's Unknowable "Ding as sich" and Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle"

Kellner claims that pluralism is inherently meaningless and self-refuting. It seems to me that we are forced to conclude, to the contrary, that any claims of objective knowledge of absolute truth are inherently meaningless and self-refuting, or, to put it simply, absurd, when even divine revelation (the purported basis for claims of objective knowledge of absolute truth) is subject to the limits imposed by subjective human understanding and cultural relativism, as freely acknowledged by the talmudic rabbis. Pluralistic understandings of the truth thus become inevitable and inescapable.

An additional nail in the coffin of absolutist epistemology was provided by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). By definition, whatever we cognize and experience is the phenomenon, the form and order of which depend on the human synthetic forms of sensibility and categories of understanding. These synthetic principles and categories, such as space and time, are prior to and transcend sense data – but they are the necessary and *a priori* conditions for human experience of the phenomena, by which we synthesize the sense data, or forms which mind imposes on the sense data – and are not objective properties of things in themselves. The noumenon, the "real" world, as opposed to the phenomenon, cannot be known, and its existence is postulated by practical reason. The "thing in itself" (*Das Ding als Sich*) can thus never be known.

For Kant, the necessary synthetic principles and categories of understanding are transcendental and *a priori.*

He could, therefore, still affirm universal, objective knowledge, and I do not suggest that Kant should be construed to be a cultural relativist let alone deconstructionist. Nevertheless, since in his view the categories of understanding are not objective properties of things in themselves, but are the forms and order the human mind imposes on the sense data it synthesizes, Kant's insight at least opens up the possibility that human cognition reflects inescapable cultural relativism and individual subjectivism, and not (or not just) universal human ways of cognizing, whatever the phenomena in question. In light of Abraham ibn Ezra's insight, that the problem comes from below, i.e., from the human capacity to comprehend, rather than from above, i.e., from revelation's divine source, even the phenomenon of what is alleged to be divine revelation would have to reflect these limiting factors. In other words, if Kant is correct regarding the synthetic principles and categories, namely that they are characteristics of the way we cognize and not objective properties of the things in themselves, then he is wrong in ignoring the cultural relativity and individual subjectivity, which also seem to be fundamental components of cognition.

Although Kant is by no means the last word in philosophy, which has developed considerably since his day, and even if his epistemology is at best only partially correct in light of more recent developments, it seems to me to be helpful in getting us away from thinking that whatever we cognize is the *Ding als Sich* or absolute truth. Whatever we know is as much a reflection of our own processes of cognition, which necessarily introduce at least some elements of individual subjectivity and cultural relativism, as it is a reflection of some kind of external reality. Therefore, Kant's insights, however obsolete, are an important step in freeing us from the error of absolutism, that somehow any of us and all of us can claim possession of absolute truth.

A final (for the moment, at least) nail in the coffin of epistemological absolutism is provided by Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976), who argued that the theory of relativity undermines Kant's *a priori* categories of space and time, as separate and objective categories, because they don't take into account the notion that space (extension) and time (energy) are actually interchangeable. Therefore,

the common words "space" and "time" refer to a structure of space and time that is actually an idealization and oversimplification of the real structure.[70]

According to Heisenberg, Kant's arguments for the *a priori* character of causality no longer apply, and synthetic judgments are relative truth:

The *a priori* concepts which Kant considered an undisputable truth are no longer contained in the scientific system of modern physics…What Kant had not foreseen was that these *a priori* concepts can be the conditions for science and at the same time can have only a limited range of applicability…Classical physics and causality have only a limited range of applicability. It was the fundamental paradox of quantum theory that could not be foreseen by Kant. Modern physics has changed Kant's statement about the possibility of synthetic judgments *a priori* from a metaphysical one into a practical one. The synthetic judgments *a priori* thereby have the character of relative truth…Any concepts or words which have been formed in the past through the interplay between the world and ourselves are not really sharply defined…we do not know exactly how far they will help us in finding our way in the world…We practically never know precisely the limits

of their applicability. This is true even of the simplest and most general concepts like "existence" and "space and time." Therefore, it will never be possible by pure reason to arrive at some absolute truth.[71]

According to Heisenberg's 1926 "uncertainty principle" of quantum mechanics, the minimum quantum of light needed to measure the position and velocity of a particle will disturb the particle and change its velocity in unpredictable ways; the more accurately one measures the particle's position (requiring a shorter wavelength of light and therefore greater energy), the more one disturbs its velocity, and therefore the less accurately one can measure its velocity; and the more accurately one measures its velocity, the less accurately one can measure its position. In other words, the very act of observing affects the observed phenomena. In Stephen Hawking's words:

This limit does not depend on the way in which one tries to measure the position or velocity of the particle, or on the type of particle: Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is a fundamental, inescapable property of the world…The uncertainty principle signaled an end the Laplace's dream of a theory of science, a model of the universe that would be completely deterministic: one certainly cannot predict future events exactly if one cannot even measure the present state of the universe precisely![72]

So what is the "absolute" truth? Is light to be understood as particles or as waves, or simply to be treated, depending

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[70] Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 114.

[71] Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*, 90-92.

[72] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 55. Cf. "The uncertainty principle is a fundamental feature of the universe we live in. A successful unified theory must therefore necessarily incorporate this principle." (pp. 155-156)

on the needs of the experiment, as both? There is, at least as yet, no "unified theory" combining quantum mechanics on the sub-atomic level, and gravity on the astronomic level of general relativity.[73] If, then, we are forced to acknowledge fundamental uncertainty in physics, how can we continue to insist on certainty and absolute truth in metaphysics?

On a different level, the insights of quantum mechanics, in which the primary "substance" of the world is energy,[74] force us to think in terms of process and relation more than in the classical terms of substance. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the audacious shift proposed by Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) away from "substantive nouns" to "functional" or "relational" nouns, and therefore to God in terms of process rather than being,[75] not only reflects Maimonides' insistence that the only positive statements of God that we can make are attributes of action, and nothing essential (i.e., we can only know what God does, not what God is), but also parallels the shifts taking place in physics at around the same time.

"The Lord is close . . . to all who call Him in truth"

How, then, can one continue today to be certain that any individual, or any particular group, has attained perfect and

objective knowledge of absolute truth? Are not such claims and self-confidence epistemologically empty, spiritually smug, and perhaps even morally offensive?

What, furthermore, shall we make of the verse in Ps 145:18, "the Lord is close to all who call him, to all who call him in truth (*be-emet*)"? We often misunderstand the qualifier "in truth," which was translated literally by the Targum as *bi-qeshot,* by the Septuagint as *en aleitheia* and by the Vulgate as *in veritate*. Luther correctly avoided translating the qualifier cognitively, and instead rendered it as *die ihn mit Ernst anrufen*, although I don't think the Psalmist meant "earnestly." Moses Mendelssohn was more on the mark when he translated it as *die aufrichtig ihn anrufen*. This rendition of *be-emet* as "sincerely" reflects the comment of the medieval rationalist Bible exegete, grammarian and philosopher Radak (Rabbi David Kim ḥi, c. 1160-1235), with whose commentaries Mendelssohn was familiar (as were Christian Hebraists at the time of the Reformation). Kim ḥi, whose exegetical works are replete with anti-Christian polemic, nevertheless interprets "the Lord is close to all who call him" as meaning

> from whatever nation he may be, so long as he calls him in truth, that his mouth and heart be the same.[76]

Conclusion: Pluralism as the Way of Torah

I believe, therefore, that I have replied to Kellner's two challenges, namely that pluralism makes no sense, and that

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[73] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 133, 155-156.

[74]   Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*, 70-71: "In the philosophy of Democritus all atoms consist of the same substance…The elementary particles in modern physics carry a mass in the same limited sense in which they have other properties. Since mass and energy are, according to the theory of relativity, essentially the same concepts, we may say that all elementary particles consist of energy. This could be interpreted as defining energy as the primary substance of the world."

[75]   Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948), 183; *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 325.

[76] Irving "Yitz" Greenberg (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 66-67) similarly writes on this verse: "God is close to those who call God's name, whose yearning born out of love and fidelity calls out truthfully and sincerely to the Lord."

there are no precedents for it in Jewish literature and thought. As for the Christian challenge, equating pluralism with relativism, I believe I have succeeded in constructing a paradigm of religious pluralism which avoids moral relativism (which is what concerns me most), while at the same time avoiding the kind of extreme epistemological relativism of radical deconstructionism. If, in the process, we have arrived at a degree of moderate epistemological relativism, I will happily plead guilty, because if my understanding of the rabbis, of the Jewish philosophers, of Kant, and of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is correct, the shoe is really on the other foot: the burden of proof shifts to those who still, despite all the evidence, wish to maintain absolutist epistemological claims which I regard as intellectually untenable and even potentially morally dangerous to our religious coexistence.

As for Jewish precedents, there is ample evidence for both internal and external pluralism in the sources. For example, we find both internal and external pluralism supported by rabbinic interpretation of Jer 23:29, "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer smashing a rock?" In his commentary to Gen 33:20 and Ex 6:9, Rashi cites this verse to justify diverse, internal pluralistic interpretations, like the sparks set off by the hammer smashing the rock into pieces.

Rabbi Yishma'el interpreted this verse as alluding to both internal and external pluralism. Internally, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 34a) records his statement that "as this hammer is divided into several sparks, so does a single biblical text contain several meanings." Elsewhere, the

Talmud (Shabbat 88b) also records Rabbi Yishma'el interpreting our verse in support of external pluralism, that "as this hammer is divided into sparks, so was every single commandment that God spoke divided into seventy languages." Such pluralism, even if it entails a degree of moderate epistemological relativism, does not imply a strong relativistic conception of multiple truths, but of multiple perspectives on the truth, or what the rabbis called the "seventy facets of the Torah" (*shiv`im panim la-torah*).[77] I think it is not coincidental that the "seventy facets" of the Torah's internal pluralism are identical in number to the "seventy languages" of its external pluralism.

It is this rabbinic commitment to pluralism, I believe, which underlies their apparently paradoxical statement that an argument which is not for the sake of heaven will not endure, but an argument which is for the sake of heaven will endure (*sofah le-hitqayyem*).[78] One might think that an argument which is for the sake of heaven should lead to a peaceful resolution. But that is not, as I understand it, the rabbis' intention. An argument which is not for the sake of heaven, for example, when a person sues another person for a debt, has to be resolved by the court; closure must be attained and justice must be served. But when the argument is for the sake of heaven, there is no winner and there is no loser. The truth can never be closed; it must always continue to be sought through the open exchange of diverse views. Therefore, "the argument which is for the sake of heaven will endure," that is to say, will continue without end, because it can be said of both sides, "these and those are the living words of God (*elu va-elu divrei elohim ḥayyim*)."[79]

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[77] Midrash Numbers Rabba 13:15, *inter alia*.

[78] Mishnah *Avot* 5:17.

[79] Babylonian Talmud `*Eruvin* 13b; *Gittin* 6b. The phrase can also be translated: "These and those are the words of the living God."