

# Current Jewish Questions

## Interfaith Interactions

### **1. STATEMENT ADOPTED BY THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF AMERICA AT THE MID-WINTER CONFERENCE, FEBRUARY 3-5, 1964**

We are pleased to note that in recent years there has evolved in our country as well as throughout the world a desire to seek better understanding and a mutual respect among the world's major faiths. The current threat of secularism and materialism and the modern atheistic negation of religion and religious values makes even more imperative a harmonious relationship among the faiths. This relationship, however, can only be of value if it will not be in conflict with the uniqueness of each religious community, since each religious community is an individual entity which cannot be merged or equated with a community which is committed to a different faith. Each religious community is endowed with intrinsic dignity and metaphysical worth. Its historical experience, its present dynamics, its hopes and aspirations for the future can only be interpreted in terms of full spiritual independence of and freedom from any relatedness to another faith community. Any suggestion that the historical and meta-historical worth of a faith community be viewed against the backdrop of another faith, and the mere hint that a revision of basic historic attitudes is anticipated, are incongruous with the fundamentals of religious liberty and freedom of conscience and can only breed discord and suspicion. Such an approach is unacceptable to any self-respecting faith community that is proud of its past, vibrant and active in the present and determined to live on in the future and to continue serving God in its own individual way. Only full appreciation on the part of all of the singular role, inherent worth and basic prerogatives of each religious community will help promote the spirit of cooperation among faiths. It is the prayerful hope of the Rabbinical Council of America that all inter-religious discussion and activity will be confined to these dimensions and will be guided by the prophet, Micah (4: 5) "Let all the people walk, each one in the name of his god, and we shall walk in the name of our Lord, our God, forever and ever."

### **2. Addendum to the Original, Edition of "Confrontation" written by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and published in the version of "Confrontation" included in *A Treasury of Tradition*, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1967, pp. 78-80.**

#### ON INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS

The Jewish religious tradition expresses itself in a fusion of universalism and singularism. On the one hand, Jews are vitally concerned with the problems affecting the common destiny of man. We consider ourselves members of the universal community charged with the responsibility of promoting progress in all fields, economic, social, scientific, and ethical. As such, we are opposed to a philosophy of isolationism or esoterism which would see the Jews living in a culturally closed society.

On the other hand, we are a distinctive faith community with a unique commitment, singular relationship to God and a specific way of life. We must never confuse our role as the bearers of a particular commitment and destiny with our role as members of the family of man.

In the areas of universal concern, we welcome an exchange of ideas and impressions. Communication among the various communities will greatly contribute towards mutual understanding and will enhance and deepen our knowledge of those universal aspects of man which are relevant to all of us.

In the area of faith, religious law, doctrine, and ritual, Jews have throughout the ages been a community guided exclusively by distinctive concerns, ideals, and commitments. Our love of and dedication to God are personal and bespeak an intimate relationship which must not be debated with others whose relationship to God has been moulded by different historical events and in different terms. *Discussion will in no way enhance or hallow these emotions.* [Emphasis original]

## CONFRONTATION

We are, therefore, opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of our faith vis à vis "similar" aspects of another faith community. We believe in and are committed to our Maker in a specific manner and we will not question, defend, offer apologies, analyze or rationalize our faith in dialogues centered about these "private" topics which express our personal relationship to the God of Israel. We assume that members of other faith communities will feel similarly about their individual religious commitment.

We would deem it improper to enter into dialogues on such topics as:

Judaic monotheism and the Christian idea of Trinity; The Messianic idea in Judaism and Christianity; The Jewish attitude on Jesus; The concept of the Covenant in Judaism and Christianity; The Eucharist mass and Jewish prayer service; The Holy Ghost and prophetic inspiration; Isaiah and Christianity; The Priest and the Rabbi; Sacrifice and the Eucharist; The Church and the Synagogue their sanctity and metaphysical nature, etc.

There cannot be mutual understanding concerning these topics, *for Jew and Christian will employ different categories and move within incommensurate frames of reference and evaluation.* [Emphasis original]

When, however, we move from the private world of faith to the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors, communication among the various faith communities is desirable and even essential. We are ready to enter into dialogue on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, Man's Moral Values, The Threat of Secularism, Technology and Human Values, Civil Rights, etc., which revolve about religious spiritual aspects of our civilization. Discussion within these areas will, of course, be within the framework of our religious outlooks and terminology.

Jewish rabbis and Christian clergymen cannot discuss sociocultural and moral problems as sociologists, historians or cultural ethicists in agnostic or secularist categories. As men of God, our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and terminology bear the imprint of a religious world outlook. We define ideas in religious categories and we express our feelings in a peculiar language which quite often is incomprehensible to the secularist. In discussions we apply the religious yardstick and the religious idiom. We evaluate man as the bearer of God's Likeness. We define morality as an act of Imitatio Dei, etc. In a word, even our dialogue at a sociohumanitarian level must inevitably be grounded in universal religious categories and values. However, these categories and values, even

though religious in nature and biblical in origin, represent the universal and public-not the individual and private-in religion.

To repeat, we are ready to discuss universal religious problems. We will resist any attempt to debate our private individual commitment.

## II. Dialogue in the Talmud

<p><b>3. B. Bava Kamma 38a</b></p> <p>R. Meir used to say, Whence can we learn that even where a Gentile occupies himself with the study of the Torah he equals [in status] the High Priest? We find it stated: ... which if a man do he shall live in them; it does not say "priests, Levites and Israelites", but "a man", which shows that even if a Gentile occupies himself with the study of the Torah he equals [in status] the High Priest.' — I mean [in saying that they would receive no reward] that they will receive reward not like those who having been enjoined perform commandments, but like those who not having been enjoined perform good deeds: for R. Hanina has stated: Greater is the reward of those who having been enjoined do good deeds than of those who not having been enjoined [but merely out of free will] do good deeds.</p>	<p><b>3. תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא לח:א</b></p> <p>ר"מ אומר: מנין שאפילו נכרי ועוסק בתורה שהוא ככהן גדול? ת"ל: +ויקרא י"ח+ אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם, כהנים ולוים וישראלים לא נאמר אלא אדם, הא למדת, שאפילו נכרי ועוסק בתורה הרי הוא ככהן גדול! אמרי: אין מקבלים עליהן שכר כמצווה ועושה אלא כמי שאינו מצווה ועושה, דאי"ר חנינא: גדול המצווה ועושה יותר ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה.</p>
<p><b>4. B. Sanhedrin 59a</b></p> <p>R. Johanan said: A heathen who studies the Torah deserves death, for it is written, Moses commanded us a law for an inheritance; it is our inheritance, not theirs. Then why is this not included in the Noachian laws? — On the reading morasha [an inheritance] he steals it; on the reading me'orasah [betrothed], he is guilty as one who violates a betrothed maiden, who is stoned. An objection is raised: R. Meir used to say. Whence do we know that even a heathen who studies the Torah is as a High Priest? From the verse, [Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments:] which, if man do, he shall live in them. Priests, Levites, and Israelites are not mentioned, but men: hence thou mayest learn that even a heathen who studies the Torah is as a High Priest! — That refers to their own seven laws.</p>	<p><b>4. תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין נט:א</b></p> <p>ואמר רבי יוחנן: נכרי שעוסק בתורה חייב מיתה, שנאמר +דברים ל"ג+ תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה - לנו מורשה ולא להם. - וליחשבה גבי שבע מצות! מאן דאמר מורשה - מיגזל קא גזיל לה, מאן דאמר מאורסה - דינו כנערה המאורסה, דבסקילה. מיתיבי, היה רבי מאיר אומר: מניין שאפילו נכרי ועוסק בתורה שהוא ככהן גדול - שנאמר +ויקרא י"ח+ אשר יעשה אתם האדם וחי בהם, כהנים לויים וישראלים לא נאמר, אלא האדם. הא למדת: שאפילו נכרי ועוסק בתורה הרי הוא ככהן גדול! - התם בשבע מצות דידהו.</p>
<p><b>5. B. Sanhedrin 38b</b></p> <p>We learnt elsewhere: R. Eliezer said: Be diligent to learn the Torah and know how to answer an Epikoros. R. Johanan commented: They taught this only with respect to a Gentile Epikoros; with a Jewish Epikoros, it would only make his heresy more pronounced</p>	<p><b>5. תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין לח:ב</b></p> <p>תנן התם, רבי אליעזר אומר: הוי שקוד ללמוד תורה, ודע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס. אמר רבי יוחנן: לא שנו אלא אפיקורוס נכרי, אבל אפיקורוס ישראל - כל שכן דפקר טפי.</p>

<p><b>6. B. Pesachim 113</b></p> <p>Our Rabbis taught: Three must not be provoked, viz.: an insignificant Gentile, a little snake, and a humble pupil. What is the reason? Because their kingdom stands behind their ears.</p>	<p><b>6. תלמוד בבלי פסחים ק"ג:א</b></p> <p>תנו רבנן : שלשה אין מתקנאין בהן , ואלו הן : נכרי קטן , ונחש קטן , ותלמיד קטן . מאי טעמא - דמלכותיהו אחורי אודנייהו קאי</p>
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### III. Common Causes

<p><b>7a. B. Gittin 61a</b></p> <p>Our Rabbis have taught: 'We support the poor of the heathen along with the poor of Israel, and visit the sick of the heathen along with the sick of Israel, and bury the poor of the heathen along with the dead of Israel, in the interests of peace'.</p> <p><b>7b. M. Gittin 5:9</b></p> <p>Heathens may be assisted in the sabbatical year but not Israelites, and greeting may be given to them, in the interests of peace.</p>	<p><b>7. תלמוד בבלי גיטין ס"א:א</b></p> <p>ת"ר : מפרנסים עניי נכרים עם עניי ישראל, ומבקרין חולי נכרים עם חולי ישראל, וקוברין מתי נכרים עם מתי ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום.</p> <p><b>משנה גיטין ה משנה ט</b></p> <p>ומחזיקין ידי גוים בשביעית אבל לא ידי ישראל ושואלין בשלומן מפני דרכי שלום :</p>
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