Dear Drs. Ellenson and Hoffman,
Below is a copy of remarks I gave at the "Parliament of Cultures" conference this past Tuesday, sponsored by Bilkent University. Based in Ankara, Turkey, Bilkent's conference included participants from New York (Prof. Richard Falk, Mr. John Marks, and me), Tel Aviv (Prof. Shimon Shamir), Tokyo (Indian Ambassador Aftab Seth), and Ankara (Prince El Hassan Bin Halal of Jordan). The theme was rather broad: commonality of cultures and prospects for peace between religions and nations. The second half of this paper is adapted from a paper I wrote for Dr. Borowitz last year. The first half is written out of thoughts and sources I've encountered and developed in our course this semester. I submit it to you as my first of the five required papers.

David Segal

Parliament of Cultures

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Bilkent University

Empire State Building, New York City

Introduction

Good morning, afternoon, evening -- good day to all. It is an honor for me to share in this Parliament of Cultures, alongside so many distinguished guests. I want to thank both Professors Dogramaci -- actually all *three*! -- as well as Professor Halman, for inviting me to be a part of this conversation.

I am a seminary student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in downtown Manhattan, in my last year before ordination as a rabbi. Therefore, what I offer today are

remarks of a theological nature, though rooted in historical experience. Specifically, I want to explore what Judaism and Jewish experience might have to say about religious and political pluralism. I think one can make the case for pluralism as a practical necessity and religious value, which is what I intend to do today.

Before I go any further, I should attempt to define *pluralism*. In political and social terms, it refers to the coexistence of multiple minority groups and opinions, each with protected independent status and rights. What "diversity" simply describes, "pluralism" actively affirms. In religious terms, it refers to the existence of multiple religious truths and, in my understanding, the potential validity of multiple religious traditions. What I hope to show is that pluralism is a good to be pursued in both the political and religious realms.

Pluralism in Politics

I begin with a reflection on modern Jewish history, because the experience of Jews throughout the modern age is particularly instructive to our discussion. The Jewish encounter with modernity has been called an "ordeal."[1] From the moment of the collapse of the ghetto walls in Europe, the question for Jews was not "How shall we incorporate your age-old traditions into Western society?" but rather, "Can you shed your tribal ways and become civilized?" Napoleon convened the Great Sanhedrin for this very purpose, to bring the Jews out of their medieval

[1] John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility*.

darkness into the light of the modern age. As the saying went during the French Revolution: "The Jews should be denied everything as a nation but granted everything as individuals."[2] Modernity, at least originally conceived, was not interested in pluralism, but a universalism based on reason and the fundamental equality of man. (Yes, *man*, and only later *woman*, which also hints at the limits of modernity's magnanimity.)

It is interesting to note that, as one of my teachers observed, many universalizing modernist ideas had a "non-Jewish Jew" at their heart.[3] Spinoza's notion of reason eroded the foundation of faith and revelation on which religion rested, making us all equal in the inerrant light of rationality. Marx's dialectical materialism identified class as the significant social category, showing our economic circumstances to be determinative of our destiny rather than inherent inequalities between men. Freud's psychoanalysis probed our desires and impulses and uncovered the id, ego, and superego driving each of us. [Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology sought to reveal commonalities in how all cultures tell their sacred stories.]

Each of these so-called Non-Jewish Jews used the strictest science of his day to uncover universals. This was, after all, the promise of modernity: through the relentless pursuit of reason and science, men's contingent inequalities could be stripped away. The Enlightenment saw a

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[2] Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, "Speech on Religious Minorities and Questionable Professions" (23 December 1789).
[3] Dr. Larry Hoffman, lecture, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, September 3, 2009.

future in which all would worship at the Altar of Truth, and war, disease, unrest, and need would become obsolete. (And they call us religious types hopelessly messianic!)

The problem was, modernity didn't unfold that way. Jews, one might say, were on the front lines of this experience in Europe. As the modern liberal state slid into Romantic Nationalism and then into Ethnic Nationalism, Jews lost not only conversion as an entry into Western society, but also their hope for acceptance as equals. Ironically, similar forces that led to the genesis of the modern Zionist idea also gave birth to German Nationalism and, eventually, Nazism. And then, the Holocaust seemed to shatter whatever hope remained of redeeming civilization through reason. So we say, "Never again."

But this post-Holocaust refrain actually contains a duality, perhaps a paradox: on the one hand, *never again* will we civilized humans let this happen to any minority; on the other hand, *never again* will we Jews be caught so defenseless and vulnerable. In a very general sense, these two statements correlate to the American and Israeli mythos of the Holocaust. But they also tend to describe the ethos of left and right within the American Jewish community.

The question is, which is the best way forward? Protect your own, or reach out to protect others? Protect differences, or try to smooth them over? Though I ask this question from a Jewish place, it confronts all groups and societies. To begin to answer, let me share a story told by Ruth Messinger, Director of the American Jewish World Service. Messinger travels around the

country, often to synagogues, educating Jews and others about her organization's humanitarian work in the developing world. At one of these events, a man stood up and began chastising her for serving suffering non-Jews abroad, when we should be taking care of Jews instead. (By the way, this is not an altogether uncommon criticism of her work.) Before Messinger could answer, a short but determined older woman marched down the aisle to where the man was standing. Waving her fist in his face, she shouted with a German accent, "It's because of people like you that my entire family died!" In this Holocaust survivor's justifiable anger is a lesson for us about the limited efficacy of just looking out for our own.

From this, then, to my point about political pluralism: when the rights of one group are threatened, the rights of all groups are threatened. To frame it within the language of this conference, in terms of the commonality of cultures, I believe we should actually resist overemphasizing commonality at a certain level. As a case in point, in my experience of interfaith dialogue work, a complaint I often heard went something like this: "All we do is sit around and talk about how we all believe basically the same thing, when we know it's more complicated than that." Most people want to engage around their substantive differences. Indeed, the reduction of different cultures and religions into generic statements that no one finds objectionable is not productive or terribly interesting. What cultures and religions do have in common, at base, is the drive to survive and perpetuate themselves through the next generation. If this can be properly highlighted, then differences between groups could be tolerated and perhaps even embraced. The exception, of course, would be when one group's beliefs lead it to

infringe upon the rights of another group. Hence the need for a secular state, by which I mean Charles Taylor's definition of secular: not an anti-religious entity, but a religiously neutral arbiter.

Let me preempt one likely criticism, which is that this is a tough sell to groups who prefer to "just take care of their own," and tougher still to those who would actively oppress others. To them I suggest what I believe history has taught us: that every such attempt is ultimately self-defeating. If all minorities or countries are in the business of simply looking out for their own, then they will be easy targets for a power-seeking strongman to conquer and oppress. Groups that seek to monopolize or proselytize by force will inevitably reach a point when internal divisions wrench them apart, as splinter groups pursue a different agenda or ideology with the same single-mindedness.

Consider those who say America should be a Christian country. Imagine if they had their way -- would they elect Catholics or Protestants to lead it? And which sect or denomination would be most legitimate? Can you imagine what kind of internecine holy war there would be -- if Europe's history is any indication -- to decide whose Christianity precisely would rule the day? To allow a monopoly is inevitably to invite violence and instability, and the very demise of that monopoly at the hands of another.

The only sane and coherent alternative to this perpetual state of infighting and war is a positive commitment to *difference*. Pluralism is the only sustainable political vision. In that framework, groups serve their own security best by working to ensure the security of others. Ironically, then, pluralism is in everyone's self-interest. It allows all to pursue their interests unimpeded by others, as long as their pursuits don't violate certain mutually agreeable laws, enacted and enforced by a neutral state. I'll leave the problem of how to circumscribe pluralism within acceptable limits to another essay, or perhaps to our discussion later today.

Pluralism in Theology

From politics I turn to the realm of theology. It might strike you as strange that I would choose to defend pluralism from a theological standpoint, since you may associate theology with a kind of religious rigidity and dogma. The stereotypical religious type has an either/or mindset, which public atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Bill Maher love to lampoon. In their view, religionists believe they are right and everyone else is wrong, period. They are going to heaven, and everyone else is going to hell. I will try to make the case for a theology that embraces the possibility of pluralism, and for a religious sensibility that is not stuck in "either/or."

As with political pluralism, this is a relatively easy sell to liberal religions. Those of us who engage in the task of bringing religion and the modern world together have an easier time making room for other faiths in our worldview. There are many different metaphors used to

explain this. In one, all religious seekers are as blind men touching an elephant. One, at the trunk, says it's long and narrow. Another, at the foot, says it's short and wide. Still another, at the ear, says it's big and flat. Each one is right, but also incomplete in his understanding of the fullness of the elephant. This metaphor is nice because it suggests a value in interfaith cooperation: working together, we can come to a fuller understanding of the divine.

In contemporary theological terms, liberal theologians talk about *subjective revelation*.[4] This view arises from a belief in the elusiveness or non-existence of absolute truth coupled with the inevitable contingency of religious opinions. On this view, no religious system encompasses absolute truth, but each may gesture toward it. Please consider, as I discuss these Jewish theologians, how their ideas might transfer to other religions.

Raphael Jospe, in a 2007 online journal, argues that claims to absolute truth are both theoretically meaningless and morally dangerous. Because of the transcendent nature of truth and the finitude of human knowledge, pluralism is the only acceptable religious and philosophical framework. To frame the discussion, Jospe identifies and reverses a traditional claim about truth and religion.

> 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...), which logically leads to *ritual inclusivity* (the impulse to proselytize and include others in one's own

[4] For this section, I have borrowed and adapted a paper I wrote for Dr. Eugene Borowitz's Modern Jewish Thought course at Hebrew Union College (NYC), Spring 2008, entitled "Pluralism in Contemporary Jewish Theology." Two thinkers were my sources for subjective revelation: Raphael Jospe and Dan Cohn-Sherbok.

> 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).[5]

Jospe's reversal of traditional absolutism lets relativism get its foot in the door. However, he differentiates between "moral relativism" and "epistemological relativism": the former entails practical dangers while the latter rarely does.[6] He rightly acknowledges that pluralism requires some degree of epistemological relativism. For example, the Noahide laws represent for Jospe a Jewish precedent for accepting an impressive range of theological diversity within moral bounds. Non-Jews may believe and practice in ways unrecognizable to those of us within the Sinai revelation, but as long as they behave morally, Jospe considers their religion legitimate.

In Jospe's view, no system has a monopoly on truth. "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."[7] In other words,

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[5] Jospe, 93; emphasis added.
[6] Ibid., 99.
[7] Ibid., 101.

> 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.[8]

Precisely by allegorizing religious truth claims Jospe allows for multiple religious systems to coexist.

Werner Heisenberg makes an unlikely appearance at the conclusion of Jospe's article to drive the last "nail in the coffin of absolutist epistemology."[9] According to Heisenberg's theory of physics, everything we think we know about the world and reality is a synthetic construction and, therefore, inextricably subjective. Religious truths, like all truths, fall into this category and lose their status as absolutes. Fundamental uncertainty leads not to the total rejection of every religious system, but rather to the thoughtful embrace of a particular system's subjective interpretation of revelation, as well as an understanding that truth also finds expression in other systems. This approach "does not imply a strong relativistic conception of multiple truths, but of multiple perspectives on the truth."[10] We turn now to another advocate of Subjective Revelation, Dan Cohn-Sherbok.

Cohn-Sherbok advocates for what he calls a "Copernican Revolution" in religion. Such a paradigm shift would reorient Judaism such that the Divine, and not Judaism itself, were at the

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[8] Ibid., 103.
[9] Ibid., 110.
[10] Ibid., 113.

center of Jews' religious outlook. "On this basis the world's religions should be understood as different human responses to the one Divine Reality."[11]

Two visual images illustrate Cohn-Sherbok's Copernican model. In one, the Divine rests as a mysterious cloud atop a mountain; many paths lead to the top, each representing different legitimate religious quests for God. In the second, a Venn diagram, the Divine's circle occupies the center with other religions overlapping but not wholly encompassing it.[12] These metaphors illustrate Cohn-Sherbok's underlying principle of "the inevitable subjectivity of beliefs about the Real."[13]

Jewish textual resources substantiate Cohn-Sherbok's argument. From biblical, rabbinic, and Jewish philosophical sources, he suggests that Judaism has long held that anthropomorphic images of God are merely analogues to help us understand how the Divine works in the world.[14] They are not statements about God's essential Being. Rather, the "doctrines of Judaism must be regarded as human images constructed from within particular social and cultural contexts," even the "absolute claims about God as found in biblical and rabbinic literature..."[15] Indeed, "this sacred literature has particular meaning -- yet it should not be regarded as possessing ultimate truth."[16]

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[11] Cohn-Sherbok (2005), 125.
[12] For visuals of these diagrams, see Cohn-Sherbok (1994), 158-59.
[13] Cohn-Sherbok (2005), 129.
[14] Ibid., 126-28.
[15] Ibid., 128.
[16] Ibid., 130. Similarly, Cohn-Sherbok argues that, in light of the pluralistic understanding of Reality's unknowability, central Jewish tenets -- such as the doctrine of the chosen people, the Messiah, and the afterlife -- must necessarily be subjective Jewish responses to experience and context.

Cohn-Sherbok's most striking defense of pluralism embraces a strong religious relativism. In his words,

> Judaism, like all other major world religions, is built around its own distinctive way of thinking and experiencing the Divine, yet in the end Jewish pluralists must remain agnostic about the correctness of their own religious convictions.[17]

Such a statement places Cohn-Sherbok at the more radical end of the spectrum of pluralist thinkers. How can you convince religionists to hold their beliefs with a certain degree of agnosticism? Perhaps you could prescribe Peter Berger's recently published book, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic*. I offer this only partially in jest, because I do believe part of the answer is for faith leaders to speak compellingly in the language of doubt and humility about how little we can *know* for certain while still embracing our faith traditions with conviction.

However, it would be hard for religious traditionalists to swallow these theories of revelation's subjectivity or cultural contingency. For someone who believes in a Scripture literally revealed by God as truth, for whom religious language is not a matter of imagination but of reality, how might we justify theological pluralism?

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[17] Cohn-Sherbok (2005), 131.

Let us turn to a theory that might have some ideological capital among such traditionalists. This theory, which we will call Multiple Revelations, defends Judaism's unique truth while also affirming the possibility that truth may reside elsewhere. On this view, God's having spoken to the Jews does not preclude God's speaking to other peoples, even in an entirely distinct way.

The Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, who self-identifies as a Modern Orthodox Jew, aims toward a "dialectical embrace of covenantal particularism and theological universalism."[18] He fervently believes in the God of Israel and the special revelation and election of the Jewish people.

However, Wyschogrod's very allegiance to Jewish tradition motivates his commitment to pluralism. The Noahide laws, given by God to Noah and his sons after the flood, are in his view the content of God's revelation to the nations of the world.[19] Scripture itself, then, indicates that God reveals Himself to non-Jews. Moreover, Jews are not in the position to reject *a priori* the truth of revelation as received by other religious communities, "as if the Jewish philosopher can somehow determine ahead of time just what God can or cannot do, what is or is not possible for him, what his dignity does or does not allow."[20] In other words, "Jews must not deny the possibility that God reaches out toward"[21] the other nations of the world.

How are we to explain, then, profound differences in doctrine and ritual among various religious traditions? The concept of multiple revelation provides Wyschogrod with an answer:

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[18] Held, 325.
[19] See esp. Wyschogrod, 185-86.
[20] Wyschogrod, 215.
[21] Held, 323.

God reveals different religious truths to different religious groups. "If Judaism cannot accept [a non-Jewish religious precept] it is because it does not hear this story, because the Word of God as it hears it does not tell it and because Jewish faith does not testify to it."[22] This notion of manifold exclusive revelations allows Wyschogrod to have his particularism and eat his pluralism, too, so to speak. In his "unapologetic affirmation of the God of Israel,"[23] Wyschogrod expresses also his radical belief in the ultimate transcendence of that God. While his Jewish revelation and covenant are bounded, exclusive, and particular, his God is not.

Here is a theology of pluralism that adherents of at least the three Abrahamic faiths could adopt. I am less familiar with Eastern and polytheistic religions, but it seems to me that they are already more inclined to understand pluralism -- especially when that is built into the nature of their pantheon already. For the Abrahamics, the Jewish-Christian-Muslim story is already one of a common God who revealed true scripture to three different groups. The problem of supersessionism must of course be addressed, when traditions claim that their revelation invalidates previous revelation. And although we cannot solve this problem with a clever theological syllogism, again I believe that faith leaders can make progress in this regard by speaking publicly in ways informed by their tradition and committed to the pluralism of faiths. If they can elevate their reverence for God over their adoration of text and tradition, at least some of the time, then the door is open. Then they can be shown the way to embrace authentically their own tradition as the truth while simultaneously acknowledging the larger truth of an

[22] Wyschogrod, 215.
[23] Held, 325.

attribute we don't ascribe to God often enough -- namely, pluripotence, a God of many revelations, followings, and paths.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that in politics and theology, pluralism is a desirable and defensible position, even for particularists and traditionalists. What I have left relatively untouched, despite its being worthy of comment, is the difficult question of how a society or religion should go about circumscribing pluralism within moral, ethical, and legal boundaries. I believe such a conversation might rightfully proceed from a principle of prevention of harm. But then of course the debate will shift to what precisely constitutes harm, and who decides. So for now, I will leave this rather yawning hole in my argument open, with an invitation to return to it in our discussion here or in correspondence with me afterward.

Thank you again.

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