A Message for a Secularized World

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Sister Geneviève Comeau of the Centre Sèvres in Paris addresses the question, ?What message can we, Jews and Christians, give to the modern secularized world??

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I am very pleased and honored to be invited to address this colloquium. The theme of my presentation**,** “What message can we, Jews and Christians together, give to the modern secularized world?” enlarges the space of our tent by orienting us towards others. I am delighted with that because it is a sign that the last fifty years of our dialogue have taught us solidarity and responsibility in relation to every human being.

I shall begin with a few words about myself to indicate from where I speak. I am from the “Old World” (most of my references will be European; would you excuse me for that?). I come from a country - France - where historically anti-Semitism has been virulent, but also, where the courage of many just people to risk their lives to save Jews during the Second World War was no less strong.

I have travelled somewhat beyond the “Old World”. I spent three years in West Africa and two periods of several weeks each in Israel; but my most significant experience was a year in New York at Jewish Theological Seminary, the University and Rabbinic Seminary of the Conservative movement in Judaism, which is also called *massorti*. For me, that was a decisive experience of encounter. I participated regularly in the services at the Synagogue: they nourished me spiritually and conveyed to me the sense of the majesty and holiness of God. My weeks took shape around *Shabbat*, as a day of praise and rest, a day of celebration, a joyful day spent in one another’s homes, or a day of study and of sharing reflections on biblical texts. What I tasted in the liturgy is like a symbol of my life during that year: it was a quest to understand the other from within. Very often, I know the other only through my own frame of reference. But that year, through living and studying in a religious world that is not my own, I tried to understand the other from the perspective of his/her own universe.

What I discovered is the importance and the joy of studying, the expansive discussions of the Talmud, and the beauty of *Halakha*. Judaism is not the religion of law, as we are inclined to believe, but the religion of the incessant interpretation and elaboration of the law.

Thanks to that year in New York a transformation happened in me. In my eyes, Judaism is no longer only the root of Christianity, but is a vibrant, contemporary reality, shaped by two millennia of rabbinic tradition whose cultural universe and manner of discussing and questioning are

relatively inaccessible to Christians. Since their separation in the first century, Judaism and Christianity have both followed their own paths. But with modernity, those paths have crossed: critical exegesis for example, has been - and continues to be - a challenge and a responsibility for Jews as well as for Christians. Over the past fifty years, our meetings have multiplied and we are discovering, to our surprise, how close we are and yet how far apart.

Judaism and Christianity Contributed to the Birth of the Modern World

What then can we say together to a modern secularized world? I maintain, as a point of departure, that we are - we are part of - the modern world. We are not apart from it, delivering to it a message coming from beyond it. Judaism and Christianity are involved in the movement of modernity; I would go even further to say that they have contributed to the movement of modernity. I would like to recall the intuition of Emile Durkheim and of Max Weber (at the beginning of the twentieth century), developed by Marcel Gauchet and Jürgen Habermas, each in his own way: modernity is a process of rationalization and of differentiation. In the beginning, it provides an entire, global, all-encompassing, holistic, mythico-religious visi on in which all phenomena are interrelated within a religious perspective. Then scientific thought develops. Art becomes autonomous and is no longer integrated into the religious domain. Law and morality likewise become autonomous, detached from religion, and a secular ethic emerges. In this way, the components of culture are differentiated and become autonomous: this is the birth of modernity, that is, the birth of a vision of the de-centered, differentiated world. Corresponding to that is the development of democratic pluralism.

Judaism, like Christianity, is very much in agreement with a vision of the world as de-centered and differentiated because they are religions of interpretation and not of literalism. Interpretation is the openness to several possibilities, the rejection of the one and only truth, given once and for all. Of course, by saying that, I am indicating the understanding of Christianity and of Judaism that is my frame of reference. Not everyone shares this view. There is room for discussion here.

I hold that Judaism and Christianity acknowledge an internal plurality of interpretations - which, undoubtedly, is not yet the case for Islam - and Judaism and Christianity recognize that they have connections with modernity. That leads them to reject rigidity even though some groups, Jewish as well as Christian, are content to maintain “It has always been done like that.” This leads them to accept an historical and sociological reading of their respective traditions, well aware that it does not say everything about the religion. To accept an historical and sociological perspective is to recognize that the Jewish tradition, like the Christian tradition, has a history, has known change, an evolution, due in part to social and cultural factors of the time. One of the signs of Judaism’s and Christianity’s legitimate association with modernity is their acceptance of a critical exegesis of their founding texts. Of course, this acceptance has not been a given on either side and still meets resistance. But today there is a rather wide consensus that if God has spoken in the Bible “in a human way” (Vatican II), and if “the Torah speaks the language of human beings” (Talmud), it is valid to study the text with all of the critical tools at our disposal.

Modernity and Post-Modernity

Let’s proceed to my second reflection on the topic that I am to discuss: is it adequate to say that the world in which we live is a modern secularized world? The reality is, I think, more complex than that. My hypothesis is that we are in both modernity and post-modernity. Speaking of post-modernity does not imply that modernity has disappeared, but that, nevertheless, substantial changes have happened. One must define the terms. I have already spoken about modernity. As for post-modernity,I employ the expression simply because it is convenient for describing certain phenomena. Why speak of “post”? Because modernity was a disappointment in several ways: the self-destruction of reason, extending even into the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. Belief in progress has led likewise to impasses and disappointments; the ecological crisis is only one aspect

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of it. Individualism, the product of modern anthropomorphism, is suspected of draining democracy of its content. Differentiation in the area of values was apt to lead to hardened positions and disastrous dichotomies; from where does the contemporary attraction come towards an holistic spirituality that may be a source of unification? We could continue this list of disappointments with modernity.

We might understand post-modernity as a reaction to these bitter fruits of modernity. Here the word "reaction" does not mean going back to a pre-modern, pre-critical period (that would be impossible); it does mean positioning differently. We speak a great deal of, for example, "the return of the religious dimension", the religious dimension that was eroded by modernity and that now is returning to center stage. According to sociologists, a "supermarket of religious goods" exists, where everyone can glean what interests him/her and can piece together a belief system. A firm commitment to belonging to an institution is rare. Many "spiritualities" are developing, encompassing a little of everything (psychology, concern about being at home in one's own skin, chamanism, etc.). Post-modernity is also the era of religions without God. A practical, weak, and not necessarily assertive form of atheism is wide spread: one has no need of God to live and even to live well. Rather than a "return of the religious dimension", this is a matter of reconstituting the religious, so that spiritualities without God succeed the major monotheistic traditions and define themselves in terms of a sort of neo-paganism: fusion with nature and the cosmos, and/or rediscovery of hidden energies, but also hyper-sacralization of the self - a search for self under the cover of a quest for the religious.

Monotheism: A Certain Way of Seeing the Human Being

And now, for my third and most important reflection, in which I finally come to the heart of the matter! In this context, Jews and Christians have to engage all of the rich resources of monotheistic faith which generally are unknown to our contemporaries. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of Jesus of Nazareth calls us out of our comfortable egoism and turns us towards others, towards all others. Today, this is an urgent reminder of the importance of otherness and of responsibility.

Monotheistic faith tells us that there is only one God, Creator of heaven and earth, and that every human being is created in God's image. This is the foundation of the equality of all human beings and of our common responsibility. Today, as racist theories circulate and neo-liberalism accustoms us to social inequalities, we are more acutely aware of this indissoluble bond between monotheism and the equality of human beings. In upholding monotheistic faith, Jews and Christians offer a certain conception of the human being, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has said:

Monotheism is not arithmetic of the divine, it is the gift, perhaps a supernatural gift, to see one human being as equal to another in spite of the diversity of historic traditions which perdures in each one.

The Difference Between Good and Evil

Monotheistic faith leads us not to silence the difference between good and evil, the book of Genesis, Chapters 1 and 2. Good and evil exist; by that I mean that everything is not neutral, indifferent; and it is not ours to decide what is good and what is evil. On the contrary, it is for us to put confidence in the Lord and to follow God's ways. This is not blind confidence; in every human being, conscience is the compass that helps us to discern what is truly humanizing and what is de-humanizing. The human being is an ethical being. But today, this message is not very welcome: in Europe, for example, the Jewish-Christian tradition is perceived as moralizing and eliciting guilt;

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many people do not want to hear about good and evil. Some turn to Buddhism, which they find more tolerant and less dualistic.

We, Jews and Christians, have to discover how we can speak of the world as it is, in a way that can be heard; for both of our traditions, the goodness of the world is the object of a promise. That is not immediately obvious, nor does it come from focusing on appearances; but it does invite us to enter, with the appropriate patience, into a story in which our freedom will be fully engaged, confronting evil, suffering, even sin, as inauthentic existence and distortion. On the relation between freedom and sin, Jews and Christians differ - not to mention the variety of positions within the Christian tradition that we must not overlook. Nevertheless, what we together are able to bring to our world is the joyful conviction that the Law received from God is a liberating voice, that theonomy and autonomy belong together, and that though we cannot do just anything (for example, in bioethics, genetics, cloning, etc.), this is so in the very name of respect for the human being.

Let us not silence the difference between good and evil - I cannot resist speaking here about confusion in language, especially the confusion sustained since September 11 as each of the two camps struggles against what it seems evil. Confusion reigns around the words “witness”, “sacrifice”, “martyr” - important words in the Christian tradition as in the Jewish tradition (cf. the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva). Seeking a way out of the confusion does matter; we cannot support a race towards martyrdom. Martyrdom is not something that one seeks. When it is imposed, of course, one cannot avoid it, but it is life that we seek, not death. Let us be clear that few Muslims, in fact, defend the interpretation of martyrdom exemplified in the attacks of September 11.

Those attacks prompt us as well to identify the forms of spiritual resistance that our traditions offer us, resistance to the spirit of revenge, vengeance, and instincts of domination or suppression of the enemy. I refer to Chapter 12 of the letter to the Romans where Paul invites us to bless those who persecute us, not to render evil for evil; he goes on to cite the Hebrew Bible in Proverbs 25:21-22: “If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink, you will be heaping red-hot coals on his head, and the Lord will repay you.” Islam too - which is not to be identified with Islamism - proposes this type of spiritual resistance, in the best of its tradition.

Religion Cannot Be Reduced to Ethics

Should our message be reduced to values like human dignity, respect, freedom? No, I do not think so. Biblical faith (Jewish as well as Christian) is most certainly a basis for these human values but transcends them. Christianity takes the risk to being reduced to an ethic, forgetting the folly of the cross and dissolving into a collection of values that can become merely “politically correct”. Judaism, if I am not mistaken, undoubtedly sustains this risk better than Christianity; Levinas (once again!) has some beautiful lines on the ethical dimension of Revelation in Judaism; “it is as ethical kerygma that the Bible is revelation,” he writes; and elsewhere, in *L’au-delB du verset*, p. 169, he states, “Jewish revelation is, at first, a matter of commandment, and the response is obedience”. Whatever their differences, Judaism and Christianity bind together love of God and love of neighbour: this is an invitation not to forget the source of those values that have become so important - the freedom and respect of each person.

Religious Freedom

I shall continue delineating the riches of our monotheistic faith. I have just mentioned freedom. Now I shall be more precise - religious freedom. More than ever, in view of what is happening in several parts of the world, Jews and Christians have to become heralds. Religious freedom poses no problem for Judaism because it has always held that one can be just and participate in the world to come without necessarily being Jewish. As for the Catholic Church, it was at the Second

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Vatican Council that the Church fully recognized religious freedom, basing it on revelation: God has created the human being free, and God expects from us a free and willing response; also, Christ himself, meek and humble of heart, has patiently attracted and invited disciples. I cannot emphasize too much the importance of religious freedom in our world, where, in so many places, people are deprived of freedom; freedom creates among human beings, a style of communication appropriate to the revelation of the God who in the Exodus is committed to our liberation.

God Opens for Us a Future

Remembering the wonderful works of God in the Exodus opens for us a future. With this, I come to another dimension of our monotheistic faith: its relation to time. Biblical time is rooted in memory and is oriented to hope. The historian Shmuel Trigano writes that “Hope is without any doubt the most precious treasure that Israel has brought to humanity.” This is neither the Greek sense of destiny nor eastern rebirth. Now, in new forms adapted to our post-modern modernity, destiny reappears, under the guise of interest in astrology and clairvoyants; the Buddhist theories of *samsara* and of rebirths are thriving, though not always in forms faithful to the authentic spirit of Buddhism; when all is said and done, many westerners view reincarnation as the somewhat pleasant possibility of living several lives. What is so alarming about that? The future is at a standstill, the future is no longer what it was. The ideology of progress has been derailed, the major political or religious ideals no longer mobilize people as they did previously, at least in the West; a certain precariousness, due to a whole collection of social and economic factors, marks our societies. The capacity to imagine the future is weakened; the future appears indecipherable, and what is more, ordinary citizens have the feeling that most of the important decisions elude them.

I would also like to mention technological time which computerization of the world reduces a little more each day. The new means of communication keep us living in “real time”, in the present. The present moment and its urgency seem to take all our attention. How can we do justice to the patience and the slow pace of maturing which human growth requires? Many young people whom I know live in the present, responding to the enticements of the moment, but with no conception of planning nor the least desire to reflect on the course of history. Is time still going somewhere? What has become of hope? Jewish faith, like Christian faith, tells us that the transcendent God has taken the initiative to reveal Godself and to come to us. In this perspective, this world does not have the last word; we are sustained by a hope that comes from the future and that orients us towards the future. This hope has its source in God. It gives us the strength to maintain confidence even in the midst of difficulties, because God is The One Who Comes. In societies that begin to look like huge insurance companies, it is incumbent upon us to give the courage of hope, a taste for risk, and the desire not merely to accommodate to the present but to transform it.

The way the Bible sees human time leads us also to say that we have only one life: it is in this life that we must love the Lord our God and love our neighbour. There is urgency in this call to personal responsibility: we do not have recourse to a series of rebirths that would lessen the weight of our karma. Here I am alluding to the essential anthropological difference between the vision of the world in biblical revelation and the vision of the world in Hinduism and Buddhism. While respecting the various world cultures, we cannot simply say nothing about the infinite value of human life - unique, fragile, vulnerable - which we are incapable of prolonging beyond death or of duplicating through genetic manipulation.

Life - unique, fragile, vulnerable. The body - unique, fragile, vulnerable. Biblical tradition has much to say about the body. The originality of the Bible, which is of interest to all of us and in which we want to interest others, can be seen in the quality of attention that the Bible gives to the body: neither despised nor sacralized, the body is the locus of the covenant, not only the locus of sexual relations but, also, of meeting and of genuine relating. The nuptial metaphor, the union of man and

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woman, is employed by the prophet Hosea to recall God's covenant with the people. Certainly, Christianity, in the course of its history, insisted on the ambiguous character of human sexuality: called to become a sign of the gift of self and of presence to the other, it can also slip into egoistic enjoyment or violence. Judaism is, undoubtedly, less distrusting of the ambivalent dimension of sexuality, even though it has a considerable number of legal prescriptions concerning sexual relations. Jews and Christians have, in common, belief in the resurrection of the dead, and the commitment to make the body a locus of relation with the other, and with The Other.

Even in its fragility, the human body expresses the irreplaceable presence of each person. The Jewish-Christian tradition undoubtedly attributes greater value to the body than do other traditions. There is value in recalling this in a world where the body is often deprived of its own reality. Advertisements make much of the body in terms of health, beauty, comfort, pleasure, well-being. But is this, indeed, a matter of the real body or of an ideal, imaginary body that is a stranger to ageing or fatigue or suffering? Similarly, the new media of communication risk downplaying the meaning of bodily presence. In a world influenced increasingly by the virtual, many young people seek to rediscover their bodies by means of piercings, with a little piece of metal implanted in the navel or the lip or the eyelid. Together Jews and Christians have to speak out about the infinite value of human life and of the body as created, received from the Creator.

Living Human Relations in the Light of the Universal

The various cultures of the world of which I have just been speaking are not only dispersed geographically, they also coexist in our societies where a great cultural and religious mix is characteristic, yet does not exclude identical patterns of logic. What can our monotheistic faith say in face of globalization? I will not enter into the debate for or against globalization. I will say simply that globalization, as influenced by neo-liberalism, threatens both the universal and the differentiated. Jean Baudrillard wrote in a French journal ("Le mondial et l'universel," *Liberation*, 18 mars, 1996): "Globalization and universality do not go together, rather they are exclusive of one another. Globalization is one of the techniques of the market-place, of tourism, and of the media of information. Universality is one of the values of human rights, freedoms, culture and democracy. Globalization seems irreversible, the universal seems more likely on the verge of disappearing."

However, the Bible teaches us what the universal is and what differentiation is. Jews and Christians can work for the emergence of another type of globalization that neither imposes uniformity nor promotes domination by the strongest. Working together like this can help us to go beyond a stereotype that is difficult to live with; namely, that the narrow particularism of Israel would fortunately be followed by the openness of the Church to all humanity.

A more careful reading of the Bible shows us that the universal dimension is already present in the First Testament; it would take too long to demonstrate that here. In the same vein, Jesus of Nazareth has the capacity to admire the faith of others, whoever they are, and to give thanks for the gift of God wherever he finds it. He rightly recognizes the faith of the Canaanite woman and grants what she asks in proportion to her trust. His death and resurrection were understood, by his disciples who were witnesses, as opening the door of the covenant to pagans.

The biblical universal is not in the order of uniform geographic extension, but of the joyful encounter among particularities. Jews and Christians are to witness to this. On the Christian side, historically, mission has often taken on imperialistic traits, and missionaries have forgotten that their western culture was only one culture among others, and not the only one worthy of embodying the Gospel. On the Jewish side, Judaism has not always honored the universal dimension that is intrinsic to it: the traumas of history have often led it to close in on itself, preoccupied with its own survival. How can one avoid the two dangers of reconstituting a ghetto or of being sucked into assimilation. The question remains relevant. The universal, as the encounter

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of particularities in mutual openness and reciprocal critique, is a common task for Jews and Christians: recognizing the other without compromising oneself.

With this commitment to the universal, I conclude the message that Jews and Christians can address to our world. This message does not comprise a particular content determined in advance; rather, it is a task that is still incumbent upon us today. The very quality of our exchanges between Jews and Christians can say something of the universal to which we have the audacity to call the rest of humanity, or not. Let's put our money on the possibility of companioning, in authentic encounters which do not erase our divergences, and which can also be a source of hope and the seed of universality.

In effect, Jews and Christians are today different heirs of a common biblical tradition. As the Swiss, Protestant exegete, Daniel Marguerat, said in the collective work, *Le déchirement: Juifs et chrétiens au premier siPcle*, "Ancient Judaism did not have one heir, but two: Christianity and Judaism unified after 70." Christianity and Judaism are rooted in the same biblical compost, and are, nevertheless, shaped differently by their history and their tradition. Since their separation in the first century, each of the two has followed its course and developed parallel to the other.

Over the past few decades, some renewal of our relationship has happened. Quite recently, discussion at some depth has again been possible between Jews and Christians. Some books published recently are a sign of this - books in which Jews speak about Jesus of Nazareth and about Christianity in a rather free and critical way, in the hope of engaging Christians in dialogue.

What is exciting at the beginning of this third millennium is that the discussion between us is now opening again to fundamental questions. The symbolic gestures of John Paul II have surely contributed to this change of climate which had already begun by the end of the Second World War. This is a new turning-point in relations between Jews and Christians. It depends on mutual confidence, which allows for real questioning. Of course, there are ups and downs, as in every relationship. But I think that, on the whole, we have entered an important stage which comprises not being afraid to approach delicate topics and recognizing that our conflicting interpretations do not jeopardize friendship when they occur in a context of listening and respect. We can even imagine - and this does happen in some places - mutual assistance in living faithfully our respective traditions in a world where societal changes are often crises. And we are living these days, since September 11, such a crisis. Our world needs prophets: together, let us hear the call.

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