



Can Those Chosen by God Dialogue with Others?

01.10.2020 | Reuven Firestone

In a well-known typology of encounter between religions that has become a standard among religious dialogicians, Alan Race first mentions the approach he calls “Exclusivism.”^[1] Exclusivism characterizes the view that only through one’s own particular faith tradition can God’s authentic truth be found, a perspective that is probably familiar to anyone reading this article. Exclusivism epitomizes a kind of declaration or theological verdict that is inimical to a deep and empathic understanding of the religious Other through dialogue. I will argue in the following that the exclusivist perspective is instinctive to monotheists and is profoundly influenced by the birth and development of monotheism itself. Exclusivism lies at the very core of monotheism.

In a well-known typology of encounter between religions that has become a standard among religious dialogicians, Alan Race first mentions the approach he calls “Exclusivism.”^[1] Exclusivism characterizes the view that only through one’s own particular faith tradition can God’s authentic truth be found, a perspective that is probably familiar to anyone reading this article. Exclusivism epitomizes a kind of declaration or theological verdict that is inimical to a deep and empathic understanding of the religious Other through dialogue. I will argue in the following that the exclusivist perspective is instinctive to monotheists and is profoundly influenced by the birth and development of monotheism itself. Exclusivism lies at the very core of monotheism.

Monotheist exclusivism is a conventional position which preserves a sense of commitment to a particularist truth that is then projected as a universal truth. I will argue that this exclusivist move is a natural response to the way in which monotheism has come to be associated over the ages with divine election. I will argue further that Exclusivism can be transcended without relinquishing one’s full and deep commitment to a particularist notion of religion and religious truth. To my mind, two medieval religious thinkers, one Jewish and one Christian, have managed through quite different methodologies to remain firmly committed to both the correctness and superiority of their religions while fully valuing the religious Other, and to engage in this dialogue without patronizing.^[2]

From Universalism to Particularism

According to the Bible and the Qur’an, God created all humanity through the first man and woman.^[3] Because all humans derive from the same original couple, no one can claim that s/he has a loftier pedigree or is an inherently superior creature. Hundreds if not thousands of exegeses in all religions that valorize the Bible and Qur’an agree about this general principle of equality. But the sense of equivalence derived from this story can easily be reduced to physicality or a genealogical relatedness that is unconnected to any intrinsic value or fundamental quality as a human being. All may be *created* equal, but not all are equally blessed by God.

We know from our own social experience that in the real world all humans are not valued equally. Whether the experience of human inequality is the result of certain social constructs or whether it is a fundamental aspect of human nature to regard and assess individuals and communities on a value continuum, I suspect that we can all affirm from our personal experience that, no matter what criteria are used to make the determination, people are valued differently. Our own experience confirms that people are indeed different and valued accordingly. It is normal to love some people more than others. We have close friends and distant friends. And we have acquaintances to whom

we do not feel friendly at all. We may even have enemies. According to the Bible and Qur'an, so does God.[\[4\]](#)

According to the narrative thrust of the Hebrew Bible, God appears to appreciate some people more than others. "The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed" (Gen.4:4-5). The text does not give an explicit reason why God favored Abel and his offering over Cain and his, but the result was that one was selected over the other.[\[5\]](#) This is the first scriptural case of divine preference for one human creation and the product of its labors over another, a kind of incipient divine chosenness. In the following biblical narrative of the Flood, God is cited as having regretted creating humanity altogether and deciding to destroy everyone (Gen.6:5-7). "But Noah found favor with the Lord" (vs. 8). As a result, God destroyed all life in the world with the exception of Noah, his family, and the accompanying animals that were brought onto the ark.[\[6\]](#) In the very next biblical narrative God confounded the common speech of a unified humanity and scattered them over the face of the earth because of divine dissatisfaction with their behavior and desires (Gen.11:1-9).[\[7\]](#) The children of the primordial couple may have been created equal, but they were not loved equally by God.

Not so the children of Abraham, or at least some of them.[\[8\]](#) God appears to change the divine modus operandi with the story of Abraham in the Book of Genesis, with a prologue in 11:26 and starting in earnest in 12:1. Before the appearance of the Abraham sequence, God treated humans similarly to the way in which God treated all other creatures. After creation, God let them manage as best they could. But humans repeatedly disappointed God, both individually and collectively. Only a few persons managed to retain divine approval, and the thrust of the pre-Abrahamic narratives suggests that even those exceptional cases were situational and did not necessarily reflect a nature that was divinely favored.

With Abraham, however, God changes his MO. It seems as if God comes to terms with the inherently flawed nature of human creation and responds by focusing on regular intervention to keep people on the straight path. In order to do that, however, the field of humankind under divine supervision shrinks drastically. No longer concerned with humanity as a whole, God begins to concentrate all efforts on Abraham and his family. God appears to Abraham and instructs him, telling him where to go and what to do, and even occasionally explains to Abraham his plan and perspective (Gen.18: 17-21). This was not the case prior to Abraham's appearance.[\[9\]](#) But Abraham is in God's nearly constant presence, and he always obeys his Lord. He goes along with God even when he does not have complete faith in his deity's words (Gen. 15:2-3; 17:15-18; 18:23-32). God and Abraham become associates in a special relationship, and that relationship is defined biblically through the notion of covenant. That covenant includes not only Abraham but also his progeny through his second-born son, Isaac.[\[10\]](#) It is a perpetual covenant that endures forever (Gen.15:18; 17:1-8, 13; Ex.31:13; Deut.4:31; Isaiah 41:8-9, etc.).

God's relationship with humanity before the appearance of Abraham was not personal but universal, and God was generally displeased. With Abraham and thereafter throughout the Hebrew Bible, God takes personal and particular interest in a small sector of humanity. God chastises and punishes that community when it behaves in ways that are displeasing, but the relationship remains highly personal and often individual. To articulate the change somewhat differently, the Hebrew Bible opens as a universal history of humanity but then narrows the focus to one small family, which expands into an extended family and then clans, tribes, and eventually a tribal nation that counts itself to be under the tutelage of the One Great God of the universe. The remainder of God's creation appears in the Hebrew Bible only in as much as it interacts with this one human sector. That is all that is truly important.

Divine Election as a Core Tenant of Monotheism

As just noted, God is not always pleased with this community in special relationship. God punishes Israel^[11] severely for its many sins, but God's ongoing presence with Israel is a sign of God's love (Deut.4:35-38, 7:6-8, 10:15; Hosea 11:1-11, Isaiah 44:1, etc.). God is present to correct their repeated failings so that a core of righteous people continues to define that special, chosen population. This is the nature of divine election in the Hebrew Bible. A man and his family are chosen virtually randomly^[12] and loved (Lev.20:26; Deut.7:6-8, 14:2; Isaiah 41:8-12, 44:1-3; Ps.33:12; 105:42-3, etc.), despite the fact that they repeatedly err and sin.^[13] The notion of divine election is sometimes couched in conditional terms. "Now then, if you will obey Me conscientiously and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples for all the earth is Mine, and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex.19:5-6).^[14] The chosen people is punished severely and repeatedly for sin and disobedience (Lev.26:3-43; Deut.11:26-18, 28:1-68), but despite the conditional locutions of some verses, the special relationship is forever (Gen.13:16, 17:7-8, 13, 19, 48:4; Ps.105:8-10, etc.). Repeatedly, a consolation is appended to threats of punishment and curses for sinful behavior: "Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God" (Lev. 26:44). God comforts Israel even in chastisement (Isaiah 40:1-26; 49:14-51:3, etc.).

In the Hebrew Bible, therefore, God privileges one community over others despite having created all humanity as "equal" through a single genealogical line originating in Adam and Eve, and despite the fact that the privileged community seems not to be intrinsically or innately better than any other. The Hebrew Bible occasionally expresses uneasiness with this situation. The prophet Amos, for example, expresses discomfort with the notion that God loves Israel above all other peoples: "To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians. True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir. Behold, the Lord has His eye upon the sinful kingdom: I will wipe it off the face of the earth! But, I will not wholly wipe out the House of Jacob..." (Amos 9:7-8).^[15] Nevertheless, divine election is firmly established as a paradigm of relationship in the Hebrew Bible and has remained a notion of primary importance in monotheistic traditions to this day. The early Hebrew Bible notion of divine election has evolved into a variety of expressions in post-Hebrew Bible monotheisms, but it remains at the core of most monotheist religions.^[16]

The New Testament argues against the immutability of the Israelite covenant and claims that it has been replaced by a new covenanted people: those who have accepted Christ (Mark 13:5-33; John 10:6-15, 15:1-5; Galatians 4:21-31; Hebrews 8:6-13; 1 Peter 2:7-10). It is that people which will henceforth be the recipients of God's love. "[N]either death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).^[17] The notion of love in the New Testament is complex, but I would argue that God's love for humanity expressed in this scripture is narrowed to love of those in Christ, meaning that while the rhetorical thrust seems to be love for all creation, those who receive the benefit of God's love in salvation are limited only to an elite community, those who accept Christ. Jews, pagans, and eventually even Christians with the wrong theology are not included.

The Qur'an appears to take a different approach by attacking the immutability of covenanted chosenness altogether. It condemns the notion that mere belonging to a covenanted community provides merit or salvation, whether the community is defined by kinship as in the Hebrew Bible or faith as in the New Testament. Only those individuals who merit God's love through their personal faith and behaviors will receive it. "God loves those who do good" (Q.2:195; 3:134, 148; 5:13, 93).^[18] Elsewhere, however, the Qur'an argues that those with the best religion and who are truly closest to God belong to the community of Muslims (Q.3:110-114; 5:3b).^[19]

Jews were not to be outdone by monotheist communities claiming to have appropriated the chosen status of biblical Israel through scriptural proofs in post-Hebrew Bible revelation.^[20] The sages of

Rabbinic Judaism claimed an “Oral Torah” received simultaneously with the “Written Torah” at Sinai, which is both revelation in its own right and also an essential means of making sense of the true meaning of the Written Torah of the Hebrew Bible. The Oral Torah argues against the counter-claims of other monotheists (or anybody else) for unique relationship with God through a variety of exegeses that affirm God’s eternal and exclusive love for Israel. “The Holy One said to Israel, ‘You have made Me the sole object of your love and I have made you the sole object of My love’” (Hagigah 3a-b).[\[21\]](#) Israel remains God’s chosen people despite the claims of Christians and others.

If one examines the argument over divine election at the scriptural level, one cannot help but note how the Jewish and Christian claims have an exclusivist ring to them, while the Muslim position at the scriptural level reflects something closer to a notion of shared chosenness.[\[22\]](#) This difference reflects the historical contexts of the scriptures’ emergence. As I have detailed elsewhere,[\[23\]](#) the Hebrew Bible emerged as the first surviving expression of true monotheism and thus represented an extraordinary phenomenon. No competing forms of monotheism existed, so Israel was the only community that recognized God’s absolute unity.

Israel began as a tribal community, an *ethnos* with its own tribal “God of Israel” that existed in relation to other *ethne* with their own tribal gods.[\[24\]](#) It would seem natural for the community living through an intimate relation with its god to consider itself divinely “chosen,” just as the people of the gods Kemosh or Milkom probably saw themselves chosen through covenant with their own, particular and unique tribal god. But what began as an Israelite tribal god eventually came to be known by its covenanted community as a universal and unified, singular God of All.[\[25\]](#) This transition from tribal to universal God-concept provides some explanation for the tension in both Biblical Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism between the unique relationship understood to have adhered between Israel and the God of Israel on the one hand, and the universal role of the God of All on the other.

By the emergence of Christianity and its scripture, the old tribal religions had severely weakened as two forms of monotheism had expanded and found themselves in contention. The historical context reflects intense competition over which of these two competing expressions of monotheism – Jewish or Christian – was the true expression. Support for both sides of the argument rested on a number of factors, including the notion that God privileges only the community which epitomizes the true and accurate expression of the divine will. The competition was considered in terms of a zero-sum relationship by both sides. God would have chosen only those living out the right and true expression of monotheism.

With the emergence of the Qur’an, however, the two major expressions of monotheism already existed for centuries along with a number of contesting monotheist communities within and without those two expressions. The historical context seemed to have allowed for (or perhaps even required) an accommodation of previous expressions, but with the caveat that the previous expressions were flawed and thus left an opening for a perfect expression of monotheism that was better than the previous, but not the only true expression. The religious community represented by the Qur’an was therefore the “best,” but not the “only” valid response to God’s unity (Q.3:110-114; 2:63; 5:72).

Rivalry in Revelation and Redemption

In the preceding I have tried to show how the notion of divine election originated, how it became organically associated with monotheism as a sine qua non, and how monotheism innocently became thoroughly infused with a sense of exclusivity and privilege which encourages feelings of elitism and superiority that inhibit openness to the kind of true dialogue we seek today. In an article published in 2001, Martin Jaffee arrives at a similar conclusion through a different analysis. He

differentiates between the aspect of monotheism that consists of philosophical speculation about first principles and the aspect of monotheism that is social and historical. The latter is the organized monotheism that we encounter in the institutionalization of lived religion. He calls this “elective monotheism,” which includes the cultivation of community memory as an identity-defining mythos. “The essential marker of elective monotheism is not the uniqueness of God alone. *Rather, it lies in the desire of the unique God to summon from out of the human mass a unique community established in his name and the desire of that community to serve God in love and obedience by responding to his call.*”^[26] Jaffee observes a common pattern inherent to the monotheistic scriptural religions: each of a number of different communities understands the same creator God as providing it with a unique revelation. While each community claims the same universal divinity as its source, both the nature and the details of each revelation differ, as obviously do the selected recipient communities.

Jaffee continues: “The reception of the Creator's self-disclosure galvanizes the recipient community, transforming it from a collection of fragmented, powerless individuals into a focused center of unified action. Within the created order of nature it now pursues a redemptive historical career, a struggle to make manifest throughout the human world the reality of the Creator's self-disclosure and to transform the human order in correspondence to the Creator's love and will.”^[27] God's self-disclosure (revelation) provides purpose and unity to the community in its journey to bring all of humanity into proper relation with God. The journey takes place on the stage of history and it involves struggle with the community's own internal resistance to the call, “seeking to purge itself of flaws that it shares with humanity as a whole.” Just as important is the struggle against humanity outside the community that resists the call. The goal is an ultimate reconciliation between God and the world through the message brought by the chosen community. That message and the reconciliation it brings requires personal and community transformation.

While various expressions of monotheism differ over many characteristics and details of the nature and process of revelation, the content of self-disclosure and the program for bringing redemptive reconciliation, they all share the basic pattern: God provides revelation to a selected recipient community in a world of stress and tension. That community responds by acting in history to bring about resolution of those tensions through a specific program defined by the revelation. Each community struggles with the tension between the particularity of its unique position in relation to God, God's revelation and purpose, and the universal nature of its responsibility to convey God's message to humanity as a whole – including communities that see themselves in virtually the identical position. Tension arises as a result of the inevitable clash between chosen communities on their separate, though perhaps parallel but competing paths toward transforming the human order according to their distinct and separate perceptions of the Creator's loving will. Jaffee and I agree that a major difficulty lying at the heart of conflict between monotheist religious communities is structural.

Two Medieval Responses

Given the natural tension between competing expressions of monotheism, it should not surprise that most religious thinkers did their best to prove that their particular understanding of God is the only true reflection of the divine will. Few expended energy in contemplating the possibility of rapprochement between religions and religious communities. While the exceptions are few, two medieval thinkers representing two different religions and two very different methodologies have transcended the exclusivist response to the notion of divine election through their writings on the value of religious traditions not their own. The earliest of these is the Talmudic scholar Menachem Me'iri (d.1316), who belonged to the period of the Rishonim in Provence.^[28] The second, and the one with whom I shall begin, is the German Catholic theologian and cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa (d.1464).^[29]

Modern dialogicians from the Christian tradition have been struck by a surprisingly open perspective toward other religions espoused by Nicholas of Cusa, also known as Nicholas of Kues or Nicolaus Cusanus (henceforth, Cusanus). A fair amount of scholarship has been devoted to his writings, particularly his *De pace fidei* ("The Peace of Faith"), written very shortly after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Despite the fact that the Ottoman conquest inspired that particular work, it was not the end of the empire that aroused his thinking, since he had written earlier works that treated similar themes.[\[30\]](#) The following can only summarize and treat a portion of Cusanus' writings, which have been treated far more comprehensively by others.[\[31\]](#)

Cusanus begins by acknowledging the limits of human reason. All understanding takes place in relation to the limits of human perception. The limitedness of human thinking, perspective and cognition prevents one from truly knowing the un-limitedness of the divine. We can name God through divine attributes we apply to God according to our limited range of perception, but whatever name we apply cannot be God's true name. While we can never truly articulate the ultimate name of God, we nevertheless continue to try, for articulating the divine names is for Cusanus a metaphor for religion itself.[\[32\]](#) To Cusanus, it is the process of naming that provides greater and greater understanding, so we gain in our understanding of God by engaging in the process of seeking God's truth through divine names. Although attempts to name God cannot produce the truth, they may approximate the truth. We can therefore learn something also from others who are engaged in a similar naming process. According to Cusanus, Christians can thus learn from Muslims or even pagans who attempt to know God.[\[33\]](#)

Cusanus writes in his *De pace fidei*,

"Oh Lord, You know...that there cannot be a great multitude without much diversity.... You set over Your people different kings and different seers, called prophets, very many of whom, in their role as Your legates, instituted in Your name worship and laws and instructed an uneducated people. Men accepted these laws as if You Yourself, the King of Kings, had spoken to them face to face....[T]he earthly human condition is characterized by the fact that longstanding custom, which is regarded as having passed over into nature, is defended as the truth. In this way there arise great quarrels when each community prefers its own faith to another. Aid us, since You alone are able to. For this strife occurs for the sake of You, whom alone all men worship in everything they adore. For no one, in whatever he desires, desires anything except the good, which You are. And in all intellectual inference no one seeks anything other than the truth, which You are.....If you will deign to do the foregoing [that is, appear and save the world], the sword will cease, as will also the malice of hatred and all evils; and all men will know that there is only one religion in a variety of rites (*una religio in rituum varietate*). But this difference of rites cannot be eliminated; and perhaps it is not expedient that it be eliminated for the diversity may make for an increase of devotion, since each region will devote more careful attention to making its ceremonies more favourable, as it were, to You, the King."[\[34\]](#)

A great variety of religions is to be expected because they reflect the particularity of individuals' and communities' quest to find God. God cannot ultimately be reached because of the limitations of human knowledge, but the process of attempting to reach God is what religion is about. We cannot truly know God, but we can know something of the process of knowing, which is religion. Only one religion therefore exists, for religion is that process of naming God through which we each engage in our limited way with the unlimitedness of the divinity. What we today would call separate religions is to Cusanus nothing more than various naming-paths that have evolved to come to better know God. Each embodies a different process or rite in a common quest and process that represents a single, common religion.

Lest we unfairly accuse Cusanus of being simplistic and reductive, he notes that "to strive for uniformity endangers peace more' than to understand the plurality of forms as an 'augmentation of piety and devotion."[\[35\]](#)

One can understand one's own quest-process (what we would today call a religion) better by learning from the quest-process (religion) of the other. Learning from Islam, for example, can lead to deeper and more fundamental understanding of the mystery of the Trinity even though Islam absolutely denies the theory of Trinity.[\[36\]](#) The error of Islamic denial of the Trinity does not reduce the positive impact of struggling to make sense of the Trinity in relation to the Islamic argument against it. In fact, Cusanus provides an argument in the voice of a Muslim which, while it might appear to be a critique of the Trinity, demonstrates how the Gospel affirms the impossibility of a plurality of Gods.[\[37\]](#) As Bocken puts it, Cusanus found that the challenge to the Christian believer to understand the Trinity under Islamic critique brings the Christian closer to God by understanding the concept more fully. "And this real meaning can only be found in dialogue with this Islamic denial....In the confrontation between different religious traditions, each of them finds the opportunity to learn its own truth on a better and more fundamental level. At the same time this is only possible to the extent that we attempt to understand the other tradition within our perspective...In the way we learn to know the other, we know ourselves better, and to the extent that we know ourselves, we are able to understand what the other thinks and believes."[\[38\]](#)

Cusanus finds value rather than menace in the existence of other religions. Even under the pressure of the Ottoman conquest of the second Rome and what was undoubtedly a tremendous shock to the Christian sense of self, Cusanus is able to see Islam per se not as a threat, but a positive tool in the cache of instruments available to deepen one's understanding of the divine. He not only valorizes the existence of other religions, he notes how dialogue with them will deepen our own understanding of God.

Unlike Cusanus, Menachem Hame'iri did not advocate theological dialogue with believers in other faiths, yet his openness to the value and merit of believers in other faith traditions is remarkable for a pre-modern Jewish thinker. The Jewish disinclination to engage in religious dialogue is based on two factors.[\[39\]](#) One is the generally precarious nature of Jewish life in a world dominated by other communities. Until the second half of the twentieth century Jews were spread thinly throughout much of the world as small and virtually powerless minorities, and religious "dialogue" until only the recent past tended to mean polemic, apologetic, and disputation. In the Christian world Jews were occasionally forced to engage in disputations with Christians, sometimes but infrequently under the protection of the crown, and more often in environments that were prepared in order to defeat and humiliate Jews in order to justify conversion, including forced conversion, to Christianity.[\[40\]](#) The Rabbinic literatures that emerged during the beginning of this diaspora period in Late Antiquity purposefully restricted interaction with non-Jews, and Jewish reluctance to engage in interreligious dialogue has continued to the present, particularly among the Orthodox branch of Judaism.[\[41\]](#)

The second reason for Jewish avoidance of dialogue with believers of other faiths derives from a perspective articulated in some detail in the Talmudic tractate, "Avodah Zarah," which forbids trading with "idol-worshippers"[\[42\]](#) on the three days preceding and following their festivals.[\[43\]](#) At the time that the prohibition was first canonized in the Mishnah sometime toward the end of the second century,[\[44\]](#) Christianity was a minority religion in the Land of Israel and most non-Jews were pagans. The purpose of the prohibition was said to ensure that Jews not indirectly support the worship of idols, for the non-Jewish trading partner may proceed as a result of the transaction to thank his gods for the profit he gained. The ban was subsequently reduced in a variety of ways: the three days after the festival were not accepted by the sages as necessary, and a dictum followed that outside of the Land of Israel the prohibition applied only to the festival day itself.

At the same time, Christianity grew and soon became the majority religion. As a result, the identity of the idol-worshipping non-Jewish Other became associated with Christians, so economic and then social interaction with Christians came to be associated with supporting idolatry. Legal and juridical barriers established to separate between Jew and non-Jew in Rabbinic literature make social interaction with non-Jews difficult. Legal restrictions constrained Jews in such activities as

returning lost property to non-Jews, preparing food for non-Jews and inviting them to communal meals, even rescuing non-Jews from harm. The literature governed even the ways in which non-Jews may be greeted in social contacts.[\[45\]](#)

The restrictions established by the Talmud to reduce interaction with non-Jews originated in the Land of Israel in Late Antiquity, a land in which Jews represented a significant minority if not majority of the population. The Jewish community at that time and place was large enough to satisfy most of its own economic needs, but it soon declined when the Roman Empire Christianized in the fourth century. Pressures and restrictions imposed by the Byzantine Empire drove Jews out of the Land of Israel and increased emigration into the diaspora where Jews represented a much smaller percentage of the population and subsequently needed to integrate more fully into the larger economies. The Jewish communities that settled in Europe were therefore required to engage more fully with their Christian neighbors, and quite rapidly to a level that appeared to contravene the restrictions imposed by the Talmud. European Jewish religious authorities responded by adopting a variety of strategies for bridging the gap between actual practice and the *halakhah* of Talmudic law in order to rationalize established behavior, but they refrained from drawing a distinction in principle between Christianity and the idolatrous religions toward which the halakhic restrictions had originally been formed.[\[46\]](#) The goal was to relieve the economic burden but to preserve what they considered to be the great disparity between monotheistic Judaism and idolatrous Christianity.

I noted above that the Talmudic term for the people with whom interaction was restricted ranges from “idol-worshippers” (*ovdey kokhavin/gellim*) to “nations” (*goyim*). These are two different semantic signifiers, but they are conflated through the substitution of terms in various manuscripts of the Talmud.[\[47\]](#) If the two terms are equal, then anybody who is not a Jew is by definition both Gentile and idolater. The required discrimination would therefore apply between Jews and all Gentiles. But the two terms may convey a significant difference in meaning. At the earliest period (the time of the Mishnah), virtually all Gentiles were pagans, but by the time of the later layers of the Talmud (6th-7th centuries), most Gentiles were monotheists. It is possible that the original intent of the discrimination applied only to Gentile pagans and not Gentile monotheists. In other words, the distinction may have been established as a distinction between monotheist and polytheist rather than between Jew and Gentile.

The Talmud in fact offers a category for non-idolatrous Gentiles. These are Noahides, those non-Jews who accepted the divine charge to observe seven commandments associated with the revival of life on earth after the story of the biblical Flood (Cf. Gen.9:4-6). “Seven commandments were decreed upon the children of Noah:[\[48\]](#) [establishing courts of] law, [refraining from] cursing God, idolatry, adultery, shedding blood, robbery, and eating the flesh cut from a living animal.”[\[49\]](#) According to Maimonides (d.1204), with whose works Hame’iri was familiar, those Gentiles who swear to uphold the seven commandments are assured of a place in the World to Come.[\[50\]](#) Noahides are not Jews. They are not commanded specifically to accept the same yoke of commandments accepted by Jews, yet they may expect salvation (a place in the World to Come). How do they merit such a divine reward? One may conclude from the nature of the seven commandments that the value of the community derives from its faith commitment because it must refrain from idolatry and cursing God. This is a theological conclusion. Another possible source of the community’s value is its ethical qualities and commitment to justice because it is required to establish law courts and forbid adultery, shedding blood, robbery and cruelty to God’s creations. This would suggest a moral-ethical conclusion that ignores perhaps significant theological issues.

Like other Ashkenazi scholars before him, Menachem Hame’iri moderated the halakhic prohibition against interaction with Gentiles, but he took a profoundly different approach. While the scholars that preceded Hame’iri recognized the need to reduce barriers for economic survival Hame’iri sought to diminish the inner hostility that Jews had developed toward their Christian neighbors.[\[51\]](#)

The *halakhah* establishes three categories of relations with non-Jews. The first, as mentioned above, is the category that prohibits certain commerce with non-Jews that might promote and indirectly support idolatrous ritual or cause Jews to benefit from their facilitation of idolatry. The second establishes unequal juridical rights and obligations between Jews and non-Jews. For example, while non-Jews are required to fully compensate Jews for damage caused by an animal owned by a non-Jew to a Jew's property, Jews do not have the corresponding liability toward non-Jews. The third governs social relations and is tied to the ban on intermarriage. For example, Jews are forbidden from drinking wine produced or owned by Gentiles.

Hame'iri essentially dismantles the first category, not as a rationalization to promote engaging economically with non-Jews for survival in the diaspora, but because he did not consider the non-Jews of his environment (Christians) to be in the category of idolaters. A somewhat similar argument had been made by previous European rabbinic authorities (*poskim*), but it was based on the premise that most Christians were not idolaters only because they were not devout in their religion. Had they been devout Christians they would be idolatrous. But the Me'iri writes, "It appears to me that these matters [of economic restrictions] all pertain only to worshippers of idols and their forms and images, but that nowadays, these [commercial] activities are wholly permitted."[\[52\]](#)

Hame'iri treats the second category of juridical rights and responsibilities differently. One might ask what moral right would allow one community to assign for itself a privileged legal position above other communities. While reasoning for the distinction is not explicit in Jewish Law (the *halakhah*), one might draw the conclusion that the privilege derives from the theological difference between monotheists and polytheists. Historically, for example, religions holding political power often assigned legal rights and privileges to themselves that they forbade from religious minorities living among them. Hame'iri, however, does not consider the *halakhic* distinction privileging Jews with regard to juridical rights and responsibilities to reflect theological difference, but rather be a distinction between nations possessed of law and lawless nations that have no respect for law. In other words, the issue is not an ontological division between Jew and non-Jew, but between people with respect for law and people who do not respect law. In Hame'iri's response to the problem of juridical inequality regarding the responsibility to return the lot object of a non-Jew, he writes: "Thus, all people who are of the nations that are restricted by the ways of religion and worship the divinity in any way, even if their faith is far from ours, are excluded from this principle [of inequality]. Rather, they are like full-fledged Jews with respect to these matters, even with respect to lost property and returning assets gained through error and all the other matters, with no distinction whatsoever."[\[53\]](#)⁵³

Regarding these first two categories, Hame'iri concludes, contrary to the thrust of Jewish thinking, that Christians do not fit the category of idolater and that Christian civilization is one that respects law and justice. The result is a distinct condition of halakhic equity between Jew and Christian with regard to economic and juridical issues and responsibilities. As Halbertal puts it, Hame'iri "transforms the distinction between idolaters and worshippers of the Divine...In his view, the justification for this discrimination is not rooted in some need to penalize idolaters and deny them their rights because they do not believe in a true divinity. Rather, advances the Me'iri, it is because idolatry generates a society lacking fear of God and lacking law, and such a society is not protected by law."[\[54\]](#)

Hame'iri argues further that all those who possess religion do not allow themselves to be subject to the arbitrariness that he associates with astrology. "[E]very person possessed of religion will remove himself from preparation for evil by restricting himself with the restrictions of his ethical qualities, and that is what the sages of blessed memory refer to when they say 'Israel is not subject to the stars,'[\[55\]](#) which is to say everyone restricted by religious ways, for his restrictions will free him from what might have been decreed for him by simple causation."[\[56\]](#) By the term "those restricted by religious ways," Hame'iri refers to people of religion who are constrained by

the legal-ethical responsibilities that come with a religious system. Hame'iri likens "everyone restricted by religious ways" with Israel here, thus making a remarkable move in equating all possessed of religion with Israel in being subject to the direct providence of God rather than to the rule of astrological signs.

Hame'iri establishes his position by identifying the pagan idolatry construed in Rabbinic literature with a focus on corporeality and an inability to believe in the existence of any independent, non-corporeal entity. Because idolatry according to his conception fails to recognize the existence of any non-corporeal, transcendent cause, it lacks a concept of God. Christians, Muslims and Jews all recognize the existence of an independent, non-corporeal transcendent cause that exercises providence and recompense. Consequently, there is for all intents and purposes no more idolatry in the civilized world. Jews, Christians and Muslims therefore have the same juridical and economic status for which there should be no distinction and discrimination.

Hame'iri avoids treating the details of the various religions' theologies such as the problem (from the Jewish perspective) of the Trinity. His distinction between polytheism and monotheism rests on the distinction between ancient nations' materialism, fetishism and lack of restraint, and religions believing in the transcendental, non-corporeal nature of a moral God. Had he dealt with theological subtleties from his traditional Jewish perspective, he would most likely have arrived at a different and far less positive assessment. Halbertal uses interesting language in his evaluation of Hame'iri's categories. "[Hame'iri teaches that] the awareness of being chosen that inheres in being liberated from the rule of astrology is expanded to encompass not only Israel but all who are restricted by religion."[\[57\]](#)

Can Those Chosen by God Dialogue with Others?

I have tried to show in the early sections of this paper how the notion of divine election has become deeply embedded in monotheist religion. The exclusivity and elitism that intuitively derive from the belief in divine election and doggedly adhere to it negatively affect monotheists' views of other religions in a profound and subtle manner that may not even be recognized. Given the deep-rooted and virtually innate characteristic of chosenness embedded deeply within many expressions – and perhaps even the very notion – of monotheism, is there room for true dialogue with people of different faiths? In order to truly empathize with the Other, must one give up any of the particular self? Can one engage deeply with the faith beliefs of another if one is happy with and abundantly confident in the divinely favored quality of one's own religious truth?

To my mind, Cusanus and Hame'iri have managed to come surprisingly close, even in a much more polarized world in which religious dialogue as we know and wish simply did not exist. Each treats the problematic of retaining faith in one's particular truth-claims while validating the essential quality and value of the religious Other. Nicholas of Cusa was part of a Catholic elite for which systematic theological inquiry and speculation were the means of processing difference. To Cusanus, engagement with the religious Other is a positive means of coming closer to the ultimate truth because each religion represents a different process or rite of "naming God," and it is the activity of naming God that defines religion. By engaging with the religious Other, one subjects one's own theology to scrutiny and critique and thus improves discernment. While this methodology might have been seen by others as a painful, vulnerable or even self-destructive act, Cusanus is able to support this dialogue because he sees all religions as legitimate forms or processes that make up the religious quest.

Hame'iri was part of a Jewish elite for which juridical rather than theological principles were the core around which intellectual thinking was organized. His goal was not to find a theological role for the religious Other, but rather to find legal equity. He succeeded in doing so by understanding a commonality of all religions that are constrained by legal-ethical responsibilities, that spurn

fetishism and lack of restraint, and that believe in the transcendent, non-corporeal nature of a moral God. His approach avoided some core theological issues, but the result was nevertheless one in which he was able to cherish the religious identity of non-Jews and consider them proper equals.

In both cases, our thinkers privileged their own religions over the religions of the Other, but neither took an exclusivist approach. Moreover, neither sought an inclusivist rationale (the second approach in Race's typology) by seeking the truth of one's own religion in one form or another in the religion of the Other, a position that I personally find patronizing.^[58] And finally, they both appear to have avoided reductivism in their separate methods, a common critique of pluralist approaches. Cusanus and Hame'iri were outliers, to be sure, in a world that was hardly open to the kind of dialogue that we seek today. Nevertheless (or perhaps therefore), they represent productive models of religious thinking deeply confident in their religious identities and theologies who managed to validate without patronizing the identities and theologies of the religious Other.

[1] Christians and Religious Pluralism (London: SCM Press, 1983, 2nd Ed. 1993), and Interfaith Encounter (London: SCM Press, 2001).

[2] I am not arguing through silence that Islam has not produced such a perspective. I have not yet begun to explore Muslim thinkers on this issue.

[3] Genesis chapters 1-2; Qur'an 7:189; 49:13.

[4] Numbers 10:35; Psalm 68:1, 22; James 4:4-5; Luke 19:26-27; Qur'an 2:98; 41:19, 28.

[5] A parallel telling of this story is found also in Qur'an 5:27-31.

[6] A parallel telling of this story is found also in Qur'an 7:59-64; 11:25-49; 23:23-30, etc. Of particular interest is the Qur'anic notion that humanity was once one community until God sent prophets to them (Q.2:213; 10:19).

[7] Less clear Qur'an parallels may be found in 28:38; 40:36-37.

[8] According to the Hebrew Bible (Gen.17:18-21) and the New Testament (Gal.4:21-31), only one of Abraham's sons inherits the covenantal promise, though this distinction does not appear in the Qur'an. Divine inclusivity with respect to the progeny of Abraham only adheres with the third generation beginning with Jacob.

[9] God does inform Noah that the world will be destroyed, but Noah's appearance is quite brief relative to the ongoing biblical narrative, unlike Abraham and many subsequent characters deriving from his family.

[10] Within the framework of the narrative thrust of the Hebrew Bible, only one of Abraham's many offspring is included in the covenant. Compare Gen.17 as a whole with Gen. 17:18-21 and 25:1-18.

[11] The term "Israel" is not to be confused in this writing with the modern nation state of the same name. In Jewish parlance, Israel refers to a community of people deriving from the patriarch Jacob, grandson of Abraham, whose name is changed in the Hebrew Bible to Israel (Gen.32:239-30, 35:10). The modern nation-state called Israel is officially the "State of Israel" (*medinat yisra'el*) meaning the modern state for the people called Israel. So too, in Jewish parlance, is the land (not the modern state) called the Land of Israel (*eretz yisra'el*), and the peoplehood of Jews the People of Israel (*'am yisra'el*).

[12] No reason is provided in the Hebrew Bible for God's having chosen Abraham except in later layers that serve as a kind of internal exegesis (Cf. Gen.26:3-5). Reasons for his extraordinary status as God's chosen are provided, however, in post-Hebrew Bible scriptures (New Testament Romans 4 and Galatians 3, Qur'an (6:75-79 and 37:83-99, and Babylonian Talmud Yoma 28a and Avodah Zarah 14b).

[13] The sins of Israel is a common biblical motif virtually throughout, from that of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32 to the numerous sins of Israel that draw so many laments from the biblical prophets.

[14] See also Deut.7:6-11, 10:12-22, 14:1-2, etc.

[15] See also Amos 3:4 and the many references in Rabbinic literature (Shabbat 88a, Avodah Zarah 2b, Mekhilta *bahodesh, parsha A* [on Ex.19:2], etc.).

[16] Firestone, *Who are the Real Chosen People: The Notion of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2008); idem, "Chosenness and the Exclusivity of Truth," in James Heft, Reuven Firestone, and Omid Safi (eds.), *Learned Ignorance: An Investigation into Humility in Interreligious Dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews* (Oxford University Press, 2011, 107-128); idem, "Is there a notion of 'divine election' in the Qur'an?" in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2* (NY: Routledge, 2011), 393-410.

[17] See also John 3:16, 15:9-10, 17:26; Romans 5:8, etc..

[18] See also Q.2:124; 5:12-14; 13:25; 24:55.

[19] Firestone, "Is there a notion of 'divine election' in the Qur'an?" in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'an. The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2* (NY: Routledge, 2011), 393-410; idem, *Who are the Real Chosen People*, 73-84. The tension between condemning covenanted chosenness on the one hand while claiming elite status on the other reflects the tension between the *ideal* of theology and the *real* of politics and social relations. The early Muslim community was beleaguered and discredited by various groups, so it would be natural to claim in response that loyalty to the new religious community brought its own divine merits (Firestone, "Is there a Notion of Divine Election in the Qur'an," p. 410).

[20] "Jews" here refers to the adherents of post-biblical Judaism. Whereas "Israel" traditionally refers to the People of Israel from the biblical period to

Can Those Chosen by God Dialogue with Others?

today, "Jews" refers to the community of Israel that survived the destructions of the Jerusalem Temple and practice post-biblical forms of Jewish culture and religion.

[21] See also *Avot deRabbi Nathan* ch.44; *Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Beshalach* 3; *Beresheet Rabbah* 1:4, etc. As mentioned above, this literature often expresses some ambivalence about the chosen nature of Israel in relation to other peoples and God's universality.

[22] Post-scriptural exegesis changes these in response to the interaction and claims of the other traditions. Jewish interpreters may soften their exclusivist perspective, for example, while Muslim interpreters can express an exclusivism that is not easy to support from a reading of the basic thrust of the Qur'an as a whole.

[23] *Who are the Real Chosen People*; "Chosenness and the Exclusivity of Truth."

[24] The Hebrew Bible provides the names of many tribal gods that seem to exist in exclusive relationship with their worship communities in a manner that parallels the exclusive relationship of YHWH with Israel. For a small sampling, see Num.21:29; 1 Samuel 5:1-5; 1 Kings 11:5; 2 Kings 23:13. The god of the inhabitants of the city of Shekhem was even called "El-Brit" (or Ba'al-Brit), the "god of the covenant" (or "master of the covenant" – Judges 9:4, 46).

[25] Nili Fox, "The Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism," in G. Beckman and T. Lewis (eds.), *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), 341-343

[26] Martin Jaffee, "One God, One Revelation, One People" On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism" JAAR 69:4 (2001), 759-760 (italics in original).

[27] Jaffee, 762.

[28] Approximately 11th through 15th centuries. Hame'iri's writings are found in his twenty volume Talmudic commentary known as the Beit Ha-Behirah (Shmuel Dickman [ed.], Jerusalem: Yad HaRav Hertzog, 1965), which has not been translated. For studies of his positions on other religions, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem Ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2002; idem, "Ones Possessed of Religion: Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of the Me'iri," *The Edah Journal* 1:1 (2005), 1-24; Jacob Katz, "Religious Tolerance in Rabbi Menahem Ha-Me'iri's Halakhic and Philosophical System (Hebrew), *Tziyyon* 18 (1952-3):15-30; Efraim Urbach, "Rabbi Menahem Ha-Me'iri's Approach to Tolerance: Its Sources and its Limits" (Hebrew), in A. Erkes and Y. Salmon, *Chapters in the Social History of the Jews in Medieval and Modern Times dedicated to J. Katz* (Jerusalem, 1980), 366-376; Gerald Blidstein, "The Relationship of Rabbi Menahem Ha-Me'iri to the Gentile: Between Apologetics and Internalization" (Hebrew), *Tziyyon* 52 (1980-81), 153-166. A helpful survey in English of the halakhic implications of Hame'iri's perspective toward non-Jews has been posted online by David Goldstein (2002): <http://www.talkreason.org/articles/meiri.cfm>.

[29] Nicholas of Cusa has been rediscovered fairly recently as a dialogician, though he has been the subject of inquiry for his political thought as well (Paul Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963]). Of particular interest for this paper are the works of Inigo Bocken, "Toleranz und Wahrheit bei Nikolaus von Kues," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 115 (1998), 241-266; idem, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Plurality of Religions," in Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis and Pim Valkenberg (eds.), *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Lueven: Peters, 2005), 163-180; and Pim Valkenberg, "Learned Ignorance and Faithful Interpretation of the Qur'an in Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464)," in James Heft, Reuven Firestone and Omid Safi (eds.), *Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34-52. See also Christopher Bellitto, Thomas Izbicki and Gerald Christianson (eds.), *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004); and the "Cusanus Portal" (<http://www.cusanus-portal.de/>).

[30] Bocken 2005, 165-167.

[31] See the previous two notes.

[32] Bocken, 176.

[33] Bocken 2005, 171.

[34] Bocken 2005, 174-175.

[35] Bocken 2005, 172.

[36] Valkenberg, 44.

[37] Valkenberg, 46.

[38] Bocken, 179, 180.

[39] Dialogue was a well-known literary form in the Middle Ages, developed by Plato and used by some Jews as well as Christians and Muslims in theological and philosophical works. In the Middle Ages, those works were usually polemical in which the dialogue form was constructed in order to put forth (or prove) a particular position. Cusanus used the form as well, but he seems to have been open to what we today would consider positive interreligious dialogue.

[40] Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (London: Littman Library, 1982; Robert Chazan, Barcelona and Beyond: *The Disputation of 1263 and its Aftermath* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1992).

[41] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 6.2 (1964), 44-64. See also Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish-Christian Relations," *The Edah Journal* 4.2 (2004), Kimelman 1-21 (http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/4_2_Kimelman.pdf); Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, "Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: Forty Years Later" (http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/).

[42] Literally, "star-worshippers" (*ovdey kokhavim*).

[43] Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 2a.

[44] Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah* 1:1; the term varies in various manuscripts and may appear also as *ovdey gillulim* ("stone-worshippers") or *goyim* ("[non-Jewish] nations").

[45] This restriction on greeting finds a direct parallel in Islam and Christianity. See, for example, *Sahih Muslim*, Kitab al-Salam (Book of Salutations) Transl. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (Lahore: Dar al-Manar, n.d.), 3:1183; 2 John 1:10 and its Christian exegesis.

[46] Halbertal 2005, 1-2.

[47] See note 44 above.

[48] Literally, "children of Noah" – *b'ney Noah*).

[49] Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 56a, *Tosefta* 9:4.

[50] "All who accept and take care to carry out the seven commandments are considered righteous Gentiles and have a place in the World to Come (*vayesh lahem chelek la'olam haba'*). *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and their Wars 8:11 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, *Sefer Sho'etim*), p.378

[51] Halbertal 2005, 11. The following analysis is based largely on the work of Halbertal.

[52] *Beit HaBechirah*, *Avodah Zarah*, cited in Halbertal 2005, 5.

[53] *Bet HaBechirah*, *Baba Kama*, cited in Halbertal 2005, 7.

[54] Halbertal 2005, 8.

[55] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 156a

[56] *Hibbur HaTeshuvah*, cited in Halbertal 2005, 16 (*italics mine*).

[57] Halbertal 2005, 16.

[58] Race 1982, 2001.