Holy Envy: What I Admire in Christianity

31.12.2003 | Levi, John

**As part of a pair of lectures sponsored by the Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria, Australia) on the theme “Holy Envy,” a Jewish rabbi discusses what he admires in Christianity. **

Holy Envy: What I Admire in Christianity

John Levi

What a difficult assignment! To have been asked by the Council of Christians and Jews to speak about those aspects of Christianity that I admire turned out to be a much more difficult task than it first appeared when I accepted the assignment. But, at least, I knew that the "opposite" view would be both informed and thoughtful. Professor Robert Anderson is a distinguished professor of Hebrew and Bible and together, many years ago, we helped to found the Council, whose aim has always been to explore our common ground and to promote inter-religious understanding.

How can envy ever be holy? The Ten Commandments conclude with the demand *Lo Tahmod*. Thou shalt not covet.

“Thou shalt not covet *Bet Reacha* . . . your neighbour"s house . . . your neighbour"s wife, nor his servants, nor his cattle nor anything that is your neighbour’s".

Long ago the rabbis noticed that the first word or those Ten Commandments is *Anokhi*, "I". And the last word is *reacha* . . . your neighbour. From this they deduced that the Ten Commandments can be summed up with the words "*Anokhi reacha* – I am your neighbour".

We perceive God in the face of the person next door (which is sometimes a difficult challenge). *Reacha* can also he translated "friend" which means someone for whom you care. But even that is difficult.

I am your friend. I am the person about whom you most care. You will find God in my face, in my fears, in my faith and in my doubts.

The topic is Holy Envy. Can envy ever be holy?

There is a Jewish story (there is always a Jewish story) about a rabbi, a cantor and a caretaker of a little synagogue somewhere in Europe.

It is the Eve of the Day of Atonement and before the congregation assembles for worship for services of that most sacred day the rabbi approaches the Ark, smites himself on the breast and recites words from the liturgy "For what am I? I am but dust and ashes".

Inspired by this rabbinic example the Cantor ascends the Ark, stands before the Holy scrolls, smites his breast with his fist and says "What am I? I am but dust and ashes".

The Shamash, the sexton of the synagogue, is overwhelmed by this display of deep humility and

contrition and decides to emulate the rabbi and the cantor. He approaches the Ark. He smites his breast. And he declares "For what am I? I am but dust and ashes". Whereupon the Cantor turns to the rabbi and says "Look who thinks he is but dust and ashes".

Holy envy is a challenge.

And to be brutally honest there are some characteristics in my neighbour"s faith and religious path that stir envy in my soul.

I have never recovered from the shock I received when I was asked to be an official observer at an Australian Assembly of the Uniting Church. Delegates had come from all over Australia and the South Pacific and I discovered that all speeches were limited to three minutes.

When a bell rang the speaker obediently sat down. And then a vote was taken. Jewish meetings are not like that – ever.

We love to argue.

And we talk and talk and we usually only vote when we have reached a consensus. I am envious of such obedient silence!

When I began to teach Catholic theological students in Melbourne many years ago I discovered that a very important part of the training of a priest is contemplation and silence.

A Jewish rabbinical training course depends upon argument and discussion. Just trying to understand the question is often enough. It is probably peculiar to my own particular brand of Judaism – Progressive Judaism – but in all those years of training that led to ordination as a rabbi, nobody ever asked me what I believed. It was taken for granted that my ideas would change. That is a source of strength but it is also quite scary.

All of us know that terrible wars have been fought over the exact wording and theological meaning of expressions of faith – transubstantiation, transcendence-imminence, transfiguration – and I am glad that Judaism has plenty of other things to quarrel about, but "Faith", in the Christian sense, is not one of them.

There is, of course, only one place in the world where Jews constitute a majority and that country is the tiny beleaguered State of Israel.

I am envious of the Christian world because it is a world. It has the luxury of size. Nobody is going to destroy Christendom although there is clearly danger ahead. Nobody has connected the dots as the Jews would have done.

Being part of a minority can deepen a sense of identity but it also can be a profoundly discouraging experience.

A story from Rabbi Lionel Blue illustrates my envy. "A Jewish boy telephones his mother that he is in love. "Her name is Mary Magdalene O" Murphy" he whispers. ‘How can you mention such a name to your Yiddeshe Momma?" she sobs and hangs up.

Some months later he calls her from America.

"I am in love again" he sighs.

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"What"s her name?" Asks his mother suspiciously. "Miss Goldberg" he replies.

"Goldberg, a fine Jewish name!" cries his mother. "God has answered my prayers!'

"That"s nice Mum" he says. 'And her first name is Whoopi"."

A Jewish wedding for us is not just a wedding. It is a covenantal affirmation about the Jewish future. I am envious of families in which a wedding is simply a wedding.

I would love to live outside a big city. In the country, down by the beach. But if we moved we would lose our religious community and our congregation and our school and the Deli that sells us bread for Shabhat and the bagels for Sunday.

And, far more serious, we would have robbed our children of their sense of community. We would have lost our next generation and, for Jews, that means losing our immortality.

At a wedding last Sunday night, the mother of a ten year old told me how her daughter had recently come home from her Jewish Day School and asked her mother whether they could become secret Jews.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Well we should take the mezuzah off the door post and hide our Sabbath candlesticks. Nobody needs to know we are Jewish".

Quite simply this ten year old Australian Jewish girl didn"t want to be bombed. Paranoia? Well, yes, but . . .

She had noticed that there are guards at the gates of her school and a high security fence. I am envious of children who go to schools that don"t have to employ security guards.

I am jealous of the Anglican Church near my home at the top of Glenferrie Road. St. Paul"s rebuilt its facade at the same time we rebuilt our synagogue about two kilometres away. We had already survived two Molotov cocktail attacks.

So we put in bomb proof, shatter proof glass windows and a big metal fence.

The church stands open to the world, its glass face opening onto its social hall unscathed for the last ten years. I am envious of that glass facade

But I also happen to know that the church has recently installed a security system on the doors of the church. Does that make me feel better? Absolutely not.

A few weeks ago I was at an interreligious consultation and the speaker for her denomination kept talking about "People of Faith" and "Communities of Faith" and I began to feel both disturbed and quite jealous because I come from a community of questions – profound questions, disturbing questions, but questions nevertheless.

And so I came home and attempted to list those facets of Christian religious life of which I am envious with the important proviso that I know envy cannot be holy.

The great teacher Ben Zoma asked "*Eizeh, hu ashir?* Who is happy? Who is rich? *Hasameach b" helko* . . . Those who can rejoice in their lot.

And who is wise? "*Halomed mikol adam*". Those who can learn from every human being.

So here goes "Holy Envy".

A list of things that I wish my own religious tradition could honestly claim without a sense of denying its own authenticity:

The Beatitudes.

The Magnificat.

Johann Sebastian Bach and all the other Bachs.

Mozart"s Requiem.

The American Spirituals (do you remember that film "Keeping the Faith" in which a black choir burst into singing the Sabbath Hymn *Ayn Kaylohenu* as a spiritual? So I know I am not alone in this Holy Envy).

The Cathedral at Chartres (but not its denigration of the synagogue over one of its doors).

Handel"s "Zadok the Priest".

The pipe organ at Notre Dame.

St. Frances of Assisi.

King"s College Chapel and Choir.

Pope John 23rd

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The Salvation Army.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence.

The Christian belief in Heaven.

The Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin.

There is a richness about Christian liturgy that is dazzling. True, much of it is based on the liturgy of the Temple in Jerusalem. But times were tough and we lost it. We write fantastic prayer books but we are not very good at praying.

Sadly, it has been said, many Jews are seventh day absentists.

The great Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard was once strolling down a street in Copenhagen when he saw a spectacular sign in a shop window that read "Hats for Sale". Suddenly remembering that he could use a new hat Kierkegaard entered the shop and asked the man behind the counter whether he could see his range of hats.

The shopkeeper replied. "But Sir, we don"t sell hats".

Kierkegaard was astonished. "But in your window there is a sign that clearly says "Hats for Sale"." The shopkeeper smiled: "Ah . . . Yes. But we don"t sell hats. We sell signs".

Of course, I have been talking about signs.

Sign posts don"t seem to he very important until we think of a world without them – no "Stop", no "Turn left", no "Go Back Wrong Way".

Without signs we have no sense of distance and no sense of place. We have to begin by understanding that we are talking about labels.

The content and context of religious behaviour is not the same as the doctrines and dogmas that we all use as signposts to religious behaviour, which is the human, finite response to the God of creation who called forth the universe out of nothing and whose law and power and thunder reverberates from Sinai.

In the words of the British expert of Comparative Religion Professor Ninian Smart: "The object of worship appears as a numenous Being, holy, terrible, fascinating". All the rest is commentary.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who heads the orthodox synagogue movement of Great Britain, and is a president of the Council of Christians and Jews in England, begins a fine article on the meaning of religious dialogue by quoting A. N. Wilson"s essay "Tract Against Religion":

"It is said that the love of money is the root of all evil. It might be truer to say that the love of God is

the root of all evil. Religion is the tragedy of mankind. It appeals to all that is noblest, purest, loftiest in the human spirit and yet there scarcely exists a religion which has not been responsible for wars, tyrannies and the suppression of truth".

And Rabbi Sacks comments, "I know that religion kills but so has the absence of religion. People have killed in the name of God. But their crimes do not rival the crimes of those who have killed believing they were gods. The greatest crimes of the 20th century, those of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, were committed by secular regimes." And we could add the crimes of Pol Pot, Mao Tse Tung and, of course, the Rwanda massacres. Those names and places evoke in our minds terrifying visions of nihilism, of mindless ruthless annihilation for the glory of the power of the state and for the exaltation of a particular race or ideology. This has become a time of terrorist violence and cultural aggression. We should not be ashamed to stand up for our values and defend our own traditions and beliefs.

A remarkable event occurred as I prepared to give this talk. I was handed a carefully preserved pamphlet by the Rev. John Jamieson containing two reflections: "If I Were a Jew" by Professor Harold A Woodruff and "If I Were a Christian" by my own teacher Rabbi Herman Sanger. The date was November 1943 and the talks were broadcast on the ABC. I opened the pamphlet and I saw that at that dark and terrible time Dr Sanger had told the nation:

"If I were a Christian as devoutly and loyally as I am a Jew, what would I do? I would take great pride, as I am sure you do, in the wonderful record of Christianity and Christendom as a constructive force in the history of civilization. In the days of darkest intellectual, aesthetic and moral gloom, Christian convents and monasteries were the refuge of learning, the home of art, and from sanctuaries and churches shone forth the righteous light of uplifting and ennobling faith. I would remember this and glory in the fact. I would moreover devote every effort of my life to the end that the civilizing power of my Church be made to count effectively in humanity"s contemporary effort to build a world worthy of humanity and to create a life reflecting divine inspiration". And then Dr. Sanger added: "If I were a Christian I would be stirred to the depth of my soul by the thought that I and my Church were silent for so long, that we found expression for our horror only when the tragedy had already reached its abominable climax. I would resolve to do everything in my power to help and to save – to open the gates of free countries where the tortured could find refuge, to enable those who manage to escape to find a home in Palestine – the land of their forefathers".

Source: Gesher.
See also What I Admire in Judaism by Prof. Robert Anderson.