



Covenantal Pluralism?

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When revelation is seen in its covenantal aspect as the grounding of a covenantal community in its relationship to God, it loses its unidirectional character. Being covenantal, it is always dialectical, constituted not simply by a divine act from above, but also by a human contribution from below.

Covenantal Pluralism?

by Paul M. van Buren

The God
who has
bound
God's self to
the Jewish
people who
has also
shown his
love to the
Christian
community
in the face of
Jesus
Christ,
invites us to
entertain the
possibilities
that God
could also
have laid
claim upon
an Arab
prophet and
called the

nation of
Islam to
obedience,
and even
that he
might be
found as
emptiness
by yet
another
people.
Those
possibilities
have to
remain open
in the light of
something
that Jews
and
Christians
have
always
maintained:
that God is
not limited
by, nor is
God's love
exhausted
in, the
sufficient
and
trustworthy
ways which
God has
shown us
and which
we have
further
shaped by
our manner
of walking in
them.

When I began to
rethink the
relationship
between the Church
and the Jewish
people, I soon
realized that, no
matter how
important it is for the

Christian Church to rectify its relations with-and come to a new self-understanding in the presence of-the Jewish people, the Jewish-Christian relationship could hardly be the whole picture and certainly not an end in itself. How Jews and Christians get along with each other may be important to the one we call the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ, but since the Christian tradition began within the framework of the Jewish conviction that this God was the Creator of the whole world, both traditions must surely conclude that such a God cares deeply about how things go with and between all God's creatures. In short, once we begin to rethink the Church's understanding of Israel, we are already on a course that leads to rethinking how we see and relate to the rest of the world.

Those of us who have explored at any depth the theological implications of the recent affirmations, by quite a number

of churches, of the Sinai covenant between God and the Jewish people, have learned, as have others in other interreligious dialogues, that we have to try to understand our conversation partners in their own terms, not in ours. In the process of trying to do that, we have begun to learn how utterly different we are: we are not two examples of a common species called religion; we do not represent "two types of faith," as Buber once thought; we are bound together, as at least Christians must believe we are, in utter differentiation. The synagogue is not a Jewish church, *Torah* is not for Jews what Christians mean by "the Law," and the *Tenach*, their Bible, is for the Jewish tradition something quite other than what the Church calls its "Old Testament." And in these as in so many other matters, we are learning to speak of Judaisms and different ways of being Jewish, as well as of different sorts of churches and, within each of them, different ways

of being Christian.
In short, we have
learned something
about differences,
not the least of
which is to
appreciate and
enjoy them, rather
than to try anxiously
and always
unconvincingly to
deny or overcome
them.

This brings me to
the question I want
to explore: surely
what we have
learned is helpful
for thinking about
our relationship with
other great
traditions, such as
those of Islam,
Buddhism, and the
worlds of Africa,
India, China and
Japan; but can and
should the Christian
encounter with
Judaism guide
Christians in coming
to terms with the
plurality of what, as
Wilfred Cantwell
Smith has taught
us, are so
misleadingly called
the religions of the
world? Having
learned from Jewish
traditions something
of the richness of
covenantal thinking,
I for one have
seen the fascinating
potential of this
model for
reformulating much
of our Christian

theology, from the doctrine of God and God's relationship to the world, to Christology, in such a way as not merely to leave room for, but actually to require attentive listening to, the life and teachings of the Jewish people. Can covenantal thinking guide us in developing a positive view of other traditions as well? That is what I mean by asking whether it is possible, and whether it would be helpful for both Christian and Jewish theologians, facing the fact of religious plurality, to work out a covenantal pluralism.

Before exploring the question, I wish to make clear that the question's reference is to the Jewish covenant, the Sinai covenant of mutuality, which their tradition sees as a sheer gift, but which, as a gift, then defines a people and its way of life. Walking according to the *mitzvot*, the commandments of God, is Israel's special way of living as God's people. The Church has

also, if less centrally, spoken of covenant, but it has generally used the term in a sense other than the Jewish one. Generally, the Church's faith is more accurately expressed as a claim that it too stands within the sphere of that love with which God made and is faithful to the Sinai covenant. The change through which it is presently passing lies in its beginning to affirm the continuing validity of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and in abandoning its traditional claim that that covenant has been revoked by the new expression of God's love in Christ.

My question, then, is whether we can work out, from this starting point, ways of seeing Jews and Christians-the covenant as well as the faithfulness of Jesus-as evidence of the plurality of ways in which God relates to the plurality of different peoples and cultures. Can we begin with the idea of a covenanted

God, committed to working covenantally with God's creatures, as we face the plurality of which we are today increasingly aware? I wish to argue not the strongest case, that we *must* start here, and something more than the weakest case, that one *can* also start here, but rather that this is a starting place that provides insights, the ignoring of which will diminish our delight as Christians in the fact of religious plurality.

Objections to Pluralism

The proposal in question being somewhat unusual, let us begin with the familiar method of scholastic theology and raise some obvious and serious objections. The covenant of Sinai, it could be argued, would seem to be the worst of all places from which to begin rethinking our relationship to, say, Buddhists, because it sets us immediately within the framework of thinking that has

been the root of our religious imperialism and theological exclusivism. With the covenant, we land in the center of the Bible and therewith are committed to the patterns of thought from which we have learned our absolutist conception of revelation, together with all the particularity of election and chosenness. However valuable we may find Jewish ideas of righteousness-of justice, mercy, and shalom-let us please not tie ourselves to those involving a special and exclusive relationship to God, of being a chosen people, even of having a divine promise of a specific piece of real estate. We have problems enough without bringing in all that, thank you. If we are to arrive at a healthy pluralism, the last thing we need is a covenantal pluralism. That has to be the ultimate oxymoron.

Moreover, as we begin rethinking our relationship to the people and

traditions of India,
to take another
example, the biblical
covenant only
underscores the
already problematic
issue of
monotheism with its
associated claim to
superiority as the
highest form of
religious
consciousness. Our
trinitarian doctrine of
God at least offers
some flexibility, but
with the covenant,
we are back at the
Deuteronomic
confession of "the
Lord our God is
One," all other
gods being but
idols. Surely the
covenant of Israel
makes as poor a
starting place as
could be imagined
for conversation
with the adherents
of those traditions
for which
monotheism is by
no means a
universal value.
However important
it may be for
Christians to reorder
their relations with
and their
understanding of
Jews, that dialogue
can hardly serve as
a model for dialogue
with others. This
strange proposal
suggests turning
upside-down the
reasonable
structure of the
World Council of
Churches" Sub-unit
on Dialogue with
People of Living

Faiths, making of the Sub-unit a subsidiary of its own Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, a suggestion as politically impossible as it is theologically objectionable.

These objections merit attention, but nevertheless, I reply: On the contrary, in the Jewish people and Judaism, we come up against a genuine other with whom we are forced by the center of our own tradition to come to terms. Jews are different from us: they are a people not a church, a nation not a religion. Its normative standard, however interpreted, is *halakhah*, not doctrine or theology. Yet they are unavoidable for the church, for by our own canon, they are distinguished from all other people of the world as those who are most precious to the God whom the church worships. As was asserted at the Second Vatican Council, the Church cannot begin to probe the mystery of its own being

without stumbling
upon the mystery of
Israel. This is truly
the other with whom
we have to do. As
Jews have learned,
mostly to their
sorrow, they are
unavoidable for the
Church as are no
others. This being
so, let us consider
how we might reply
to the objections
that I have raised.

Before beginning, I
should like to draw
your attention to the
anti-Judaic
undercurrent, so
typical of our
tradition, in each of
the objections. I
suggest that a lack
of understanding-
and a consequent
lack of appreciation-
of the Jewish
tradition is evident
in the published
writings of too many
champions of
interreligious
dialogue, who
suppose that a
central concern of
Jesus of Nazareth
was to combat what
they call legalism,
and whose
typically Christian
longing for
universality seems
to be in danger of
being inherently
anti-particularistic, a
danger that our
quest for a healthy
pluralism will try to
avoid as we turn to
our objections.

Revelation and Identity

It is unquestionably true that to take the covenant of Sinai as our point of departure lands us in the middle of our traditional commitment to the Bible and so to a biblical view of revelation and the election of Israel. But interreligious dialogue demands of us more than that we allow others to define themselves in their own terms and that we try to learn to work with that definition ourselves. It also demands that we enter into the dialogue faithful to our own identity. If we fail to bring our own identity into the conversation, if we leave behind our own story, the ensuing discussion can hardly be an interreligious one. What sort of dialogue would that be if we forgot who we were and where we come from in order to pretend to a universal neutrality? One might call that a dialogue between a Buddhist, let us say, and an imaginary ideal of

the Enlightenment,
but it would not be a
Buddhist-Christian
dialogue. If we are
to be honest and
authentic in
dialogue, we must
come with our own
story, even if in
dialogue we
discover that our
partner has never
thought of even
having a story to
tell. If our problem
may be defined as
having told our story
in such a way as to
leave no place for
the other, then we
need to rethink how
we have learned
and how we are to
continue to tell it. If
we don't start
working at that, I do
not see how we
are going to begin
the growing that
dialogue makes
possible, and I
mean growing into
deeper and better
Christians, Jews,
Muslims, Buddhists,
and the rest, not
growing into more
tolerant relativists.
For us Christians,
that will require
coming to dialogue
Bible in hand, so
that we may learn
new ways of
reading it. If we
leave it at home, our
old reading will
come back to haunt
us or our children.

Without question,
when we arrive

carrying our Bibles, we enter committed to what with Franz Rosenzweig some would call "the offensive idea of revelation." Wherein does the presumed offense lie? In part it comes from the debatable thesis that the result of revelation is knowledge, information which is possessed only by those to whom the revelation is given. But when one looks at the central biblical stories of revelation, it seems more appropriate to say that the result of revelation is the formation of community. The people of Israel were already a community of sorts when they came to Sinai, but Sinai constitutes them as the people of Torah, the people of the covenant, who now live under the obligations of the revelation. And in the story of the Christian revelation, the disciples of Jesus are formed into the "little flock," called into the life of community that came to be called the Church. In neither case is there a necessarily offensive element.

The presumed offense is more fully dissipated when revelation is seen in its covenantal aspect. As the grounding of a covenantal community in its relationship to God, revelation loses its unidirectional character. Being covenantal, it is always dialectical, constituted not simply by a divine act from above, but also by a human contribution from below. This can be clarified by a rabbinic story.

In a well-known *midrash*, it is said that there was a serious conflict among the rabbis in the early Talmudic period over a halakhic decision. Rabbi Eliezer held out against his colleagues and called forth in support of his position several rather striking miracles, which took place then and there in the face of his opponents, not the least of which was a strong voice from heaven. But the rest of the rabbis, argued that neither miracles nor even a voice from heaven were

binding, but only a majority rabbinic judgment, and Rabbi Eliezer was overruled. As the midrash continues, one of the rabbis happened to meet the ancient prophet Elijah, so he asked him, what the Almighty did when that rabbinic decision was made. Elijah replied: "He laughed and said, "My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me!" (Baba Metzia, 59b). God reveals God's word, but Israel through its rabbis decides what that word means. This fundamentally covenantal conception of revelation is also evident in the saying of another Jew to his disciples, that what they decided on earth, that is, among themselves, would be binding in heaven, that is, on God (Matt 16:19).

Revelation conceived covenantally is a divine gift humanly received and interpreted. And this is just what we find in the writings which the church holds to be canonical: they

consist of the community's continual reinterpretation of its own past story. The history of the church, it could be said in this connection, is in large part the history of its continuing reinterpretation of that story. As the history of both the Church and the Jewish people show, that is how a living linguistic community lives with writings it holds to be sacred.

Our understanding of revelation, then, is already determined for us by the very fact of our coming to dialogue with our Bibles in our hands, and that we do so come was itself determined for us before there ever was a church. It was determined by the revolution in early Judaism that was announced in the judgment, "No more prophecy after Ezra." Before Ezra, if you wanted to know the will of God, you sought out a prophet; now you went to the book, and that meant you always went to those judged qualified to interpret

the book. That early Jewish decision has meant that, for both Judaism and Christianity, there would be no uninterpreted revelation. For the purposes of interreligious conversation, we may conclude that biblical or covenantal revelation means that all knowledge of God is human knowledge, knowledge that is held in a particular historical, cultural framework. What better starting point than a covenantal concept of revelation could we have for listening with respect and attention to the insights of other human traditions?

God's Way(s) of Being God

Central to the covenant of which the Bible and both the Jewish and Christian traditions speak is the concept of election. The objection that I raised saw in this concept unavoidable overtones of exclusiveness, privilege, and

superiority. But one fruit of the Jewish-Christian conversation has been the growing realization of how inaccurate that is. At its heart, for both traditions and for the biblical story which both hold dear, election is the code name for immediacy, intimacy and singularity. One has only to look at the crucial text in Exodus 19, the famous "eagles' wings" address of the Lord to Moses, in order to see this: "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" "Covenant is obligation not privilege, intimacy not-exclusivity. The reference to the Egyptians is to God's care for Israel, and it is worth noting that, in commenting on the

total lack of any mention of rejoicing in the account of the institution of the Passover Festival, a rabbinic midrash on the Exodus (*Meg.* 10b, cited in Montifiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 52) says that some of the angels wanted to sing a hymn to celebrate the destruction of the Egyptians, "but God said: My children lie drowned in the sea, and you would sing?"

God's choice of Israel is as a treasured possession, not as an only possession, for all the earth is God's. A special calling in an awe filled intimacy, as priests and as holy, is to be the lot of this people. God's relationship to Israel is singular, unique, as one might assume is God's relationship with other people. Later prophets saw it on the model of a marriage. And some early Christian writers used the same metaphor for God's singular relationship to the Church in God's movement toward them in Christ. The good shepherd

knows his own and
calls them by name.
To dissolve the
singularity of
election into some
general image of
the divine-human
relationship would
be to undercut the
intimacy and
directness of both
Jewish and
Christian
apprehensions of
God.

As Jews and
Christians together
have come to
appreciate some
such conception of
how God has
chosen Israel as a
people to be God's
people, and
Christians one by
one to be a
community in Christ,
we have had to
recognize, accept,
and honor not only
the differences
between us, but
also the diversity of
how God has been
and is God for us.
We are being
compelled to stop
making God so
precisely in our own
image as to share in
our principle of
scarcity. God seems
to be richer than
that, able to show
intimate divine love
to us both, in what
may appear to our
distorted vision a
bigamous fashion.
But that only
underscores what

both traditions have
said about the
richness of a divine
love that quite
surpasses our
under standing.
Does this not then
require that we be
honestly open to the
possibility that
God"s way of
being God for
others may be other
than either Jews or
Christians know?
What grounds do
we have for being
sure that the one
who has shown
God"s Torah reality
to Israel and God"s
Logos reality to the
Church could not
possibly show
God"s emptiness
reality, which only a
few of our mystics
have dared to
mention, more fully
to Buddhists?

Where then is our
vaunted
monotheism? Is
God, so conceived,
still One? Is this not
simply a trick by
which polytheism,
which William
James believed to
be the most
appropriate faith in
a pluralistic
universe, may be
disguised as
monotheism? No
answer should be
attempted until we
are clear about the
question, and the
question is not all
that clear. As we

start to consider it,
we would do well to
recall the warning of
St. Augustine: he
who begins to
count begins to err.

The peculiarly
Western concept of
monotheism has
one of its roots in
the Greek
fascination with
unity, but it is also
rooted in the
confession of
Deuteronomy 6:
"Hear O Israel, the
Lord our God, the
Lord *ekhad*." How
should we translate
and how interpret?
A familiar translation
is, "the Lord our
God, the Lord is
one." Another
Jewish translation of
the Hebrew,
however, is, "the
Lord is our God, the
Lord alone." Both
are possible
grammatically, but
the variety of
medieval and
modern Jewish
interpretations leads
me to conclude that
the second catches
more of the senses
appropriate to the
context. The Lord
alone-this one God,
the Lord who is God
of the whole earth-
the Lord alone is to
be obeyed and
heard. The
emphasis is not on
the relatively
modern idea of
monotheism, but on

the idea that Israel is to serve and listen to this Lord with the singularity of the relationship of the covenant that binds them mutually to each other.

H. Richard Niebuhr, it seems to me, caught the sense of this confession in his enduringly important book, *The Meaning of Revelation*, written fifty years ago. He pointed out that the confession of persons of faith took the form of telling "what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view" (41; cf. 72), and he argued that this confession is thoroughly undermined by any attempt to justify it or claim its superiority. Therefore, "we can speak of revelation only in connection with our own history without affirming or denying its reality in the history of other communities into whose life we cannot penetrate without abandoning ourselves and our community" (82; cf. 38, 41). The

dialogical
experience of the
past several
decades suggests
that it is possible, at
least for some, to
penetrate, at least
to some degree,
into the life of
another community,
without denying
their own. Niebuhr's
words nonetheless
confirm what I take
to be the central
meaning of Israel's
covenantal
confession, not
that God is one, but
that the one who
has made covenant
with Israel claims
Israel's love with
all its heart and with
all its soul and with
all its might (Deut.
6:5). Israel's
confession of God
comes out of and
expresses its
singular historical
experience of what
has happened to it
in its life in the
covenant. Careful
attention to Israel's
covenantal
confession can save
us from the
consequences of
claiming to know
more about God
than we have been
shown. The extent
of that confession-
and for Israel that is
quite sufficient-is
that God has
reached Israel in
God's own way, a
way that calls for an
appropriate
response in the life
of a community

living in the memory
and celebration of
its story of this
relationship.

Story and Truth

Communities have their myths, their stories of how they began and how they have endured. Such stories are taken seriously and often literally by members of the community. Those who belong to other communities can also take those stories seriously, but as a Jewish philosopher said of Jewish midrash, they should be taken seriously but not literally. We can do this if we can enjoy the diversity not always trying to find commonalities. Why not allow that God spoke to Muhammad, even if we do not take every word of the Qur'an as Muslims do? Why not, to take an example closer to home, allow that God spoke to Joseph Smith? A friend and student of mine a Mormon, has shown me that it is possible to be a devoted member of the Church of the Latter Day Saints

and to enjoy and take seriously their story with the same sort of second naïveté that many Christians employ in loving the Christmas story.

It is characteristic of the linguistic communities that are called religions that they tend to see the rest of the world through their stories. But it is an important feature of Israel's covenantal story that it does not require that there be no stories except this one. On the contrary, the biblical story implies that there will be other stories as well, for it is the story of a God of the whole earth. The very singularity of its story would be lost if others did not have their stories too. This point has become clearer to many of those engaged in the Jewish-Christian encounter. There, we have been learning to say that, just as Israel's story affirms for Christians as well as for Jews that God is to be trusted as having a singular relationship with Israel, so the Church's story invites Christians to trust-and some

Jews to allow that the same God has really shown his face to the Church in Jesus Christ. This ability to say that the God who has bound God's self to the Jewish people has also shown his love to the Christian community in the face of Jesus Christ, invites us to entertain the possibilities that God could also have laid claim upon an Arab prophet and called the nation of Islam to obedience, and even that he might be found as emptiness by yet another people. Those possibilities have to remain open in the light of something that Jews and Christians have always maintained: that God is not limited by, nor is God's love exhausted in, the sufficient and trustworthy ways which God has shown us and which we have further shaped by our manner of walking in them.

It might be tempting at this point to raise the question of truth, as if there were such a thing

as the question of truth. If there were, we might be led to say that no community has the truth but only a larger or smaller part of the truth. But I think J. L. Austin can rescue us from this slide into abstraction by reminding us that "true" and "false" are just general labels for a whole dimension of different appraisals which have something or other to do with the relation between what we say and the facts" (Philosophical Papers, Second Ed., 250 f.). There is neither contradiction nor lack of faith if we say that the relationship with God which our community has received and discovered is both genuine and sufficient, and that another community may have received and discovered a relationship also genuine and sufficient, but of a different sort. Indeed, if we cannot say both, then I do not understand what we have meant in saying that the love of God surpasses human understanding.

If we set aside our principle of scarcity and adopt the more appropriate principle of superabundance, it should be possible for us to speak of and find actual delight in not only the variety of human ways of speaking of God, or of that which is the ultimate reality, but even more in the incredible richness of a God who can love all creation and relate to the multiplicity of creatures in multiple ways. It should be a matter of both joy and wonder that God may be *Gohing* quite different human communities in quite different ways. Covenantal thinking will be open to a plurality in God's reality-in what we have called the fullness of God-not merely in human apprehensions of God. In that case, each apprehension of God could be true in the only sense that should matter to any community: God, by whatever name, has found you and been found by you; God is trustworthy; and you will know and show this truth by doing it, that is, by living accordingly.

There is no place where we human beings can stand other than as human beings within our language. Our thoughts of God will always come to us in our own words. We have no choice but to accept our relativity, which is, after all, but another name for our finitude, our singularity, our particular identity, a gift to be enjoyed, not a handicap that we might imagine we can overcome. We shall come to terms with the plurality of the world's traditions in the terms of our own tradition, whether they be those of the quite popular but still particular tradition of Western secularity, or those of the less popular ones of the linguistic communities centered on the biblical story. In the terms of these latter, I suggest that the question of truth goes something like this.

If the God of Sinai is trustworthy, then we trust what Sinai reveals: that God is truly covenantally self-determined and committed to having

it out with God's
covenant partners,
as Jews have
always said. And if
the God and Father
of Jesus Christ is
indeed the God of
Israel, the God of
Abraham, Isaac and
Jacob, as Christians
have always said,
then God's way of
being God for the
Church will surely
be compatible with
God's way of being
God for Israel: as
the self-determined
and committed God.
That means that
God's logos-being
for the Church, as
revealed in the
exaltation of the
crucified man also
be seen
covenantally, Easter
being seen at once
as the work of God
and the work of the
trusting Church.
Now if the
covenant can help
us to see the
diversity of God's
being God for Israel
and also for the
Church, then it may
also open us to
appreciate the
diverse reality of
one who may even
be known through
disciplined
meditation in India
as emptiness, or
through total
submission in
Arabia as The All-
Merciful. I do not for
a moment suggest
that is how
Buddhists, on the
one hand, or

Muslims on the other, would dream of putting it. I propose only that the covenant as we are learning to see it in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, can provide an opening to our appreciation of the richness of God's ways with the inhabitants of this earth, ways in which we may rejoice in all the intimacy of our singularity, without in any way having to deny a priori the singularity of others as recipients, along with us, of the fullness of God's ways of being God of the whole earth.

In this context, we can address the issue posed by those few but much-quoted texts from the early Christian writings that say that Jesus is the only way for any person to come to this God, texts often cited by those who ignore other texts that say just the opposite. Those texts too can be seen confessionally as the affirmation of a way that has been shown as sufficient and trustworthy, a confession of what has happened to and in the Christian community. As for

their negative formulation (e.g., "No one comes to the Father but through me"), we might learn from the rabbis the art of neutralizing texts that no longer serve the present interests of a living, developing community. The author of that text from the Fourth Gospel bore witness to what his community knew from its own life. If he sounds as if he went beyond that and presumed to know what he could not possibly have known-namely, how God opens or closes the doors of life to Indians or Africans-then we should listen to him with discrimination and a sense of humor. I suggest it would be better to be a bit more humble in our claims about what God can or cannot do apart from us and outside our community.

This is all very nice, some might object, but amid all the differences between the ideas of different communities, there are not just rich

variety but flat contradictions. An Indian colleague taught me some years ago, however, that what may seem to be flat contradictions from the viewpoint of Western either/or logic appear quite different when seen from the angle of a four-fold logic that includes a both/and and also a neither/nor. Even in our own terms, if with God all things are possible, as our tradition says, then with God it would seem that nothing is necessary. On either ground, we shall do well to do away with what a friend of mine calls "musty" theology: we can stop saying how things must be. Instead, we shall imagine, as indeed we have always had to do in theology; and we must imagine how all our imaginings may be far too narrow. A theology that rejects all "mustiness" would perhaps be a more playful theology, as my Indian colleague taught me it could be and already is in Indian philosophy, and therefore more fun to do. One way in which theology could be-not must be, but could be-more playful and

exciting might be
as a theology of
covenantal
pluralism.

It is my hope that in
exploring this
possibility, I have
shown that it has
something to
contribute to our
being joyously
Christian, in all our
singularity, in
welcoming
openness to the
plurality of this
world's gloriously
diverse ways of
being seriously
human about that
which we think
matters to us most.
It could be-who
knows?-that what
we mean by the
covenantal God is
even more
gloriously humble in
fullness than
anything that has
ever crossed any
of our minds. No
more appropriate
words for such an
undreamed-of
possibility can be
found, I believe,
than those of an
early explorer of
God's pluralism, the
Jewish Apostle to
the Gentiles: "O the
depth of the riches
and wisdom and
knowledge of God!
How unsearchable
are his judgments
and how inscrutable
his ways! "For who
has known the mind
of the Lord, or who

has been his counselor?" Who indeed? Certainly not any mere theologian.

This article is based on a talk given by Paul. M. van Buren on the occasion of his receiving the Sir Sigmund Sternberg Award for his contribution to the theological task of rethinking his own tradition in the light of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

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