Covenantal Pluralism?

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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 rev elation 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 in accurate 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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