

Holy Envy: What I Admire in Judaism

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

Holy Envy: What I Admire in Judaism

Robert Anderson

“Holy Envy”: it is an intriguing expression. May I say a little about the person who coined it, Krister Stendahl, theologian and ecclesiastical dignitary, and one who, for four or five decades, has played a pivotal role in the betterment of relations between Jews and Christians.

For quite some time he was the Chairman of the World Council of Churches" Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People of which I was a member for a number of years. This was a body that sat rather uncomfortably with some other divisions of the WCC. In 1983 a somewhat toned-down, but still very important and useful statement on Jewish and Christian relations, was produced under the astute guidance of Stendahl. After much negotiation this was at last accepted by the WCC"s Central Committee and forwarded to member churches for discussion. Alas, it scarcely saw the light of day, certainly not in this country.

When I completed my initial theological studies at New College, Edinburgh, in 1959 I carried with me into my ensuing ministry an understanding of Judaism that was little better than a caricature. That would have been the experience of most theological students at that time no matter what or where the institution attended.

The Torah, so central to any appreciation of Judaism, was equated with an arid legalism.

Judaism was seen as nothing more than the historical and religious precursor to Christianity which was boldly presented as the true bearer of the divinely-ordained good news, the gospel. The Old Testament, so called, was just that, offering itself for fulfilment in the "new". At that time, and before, very few Christian scholars had any academic grasp of Rabbinic literature let alone anything beyond that. And sometimes this literature was presented in such a distorted manner that it did little or nothing to counter the generally accepted Christian viewpoint.

Fortunately such is not the case today and at the forefront of those who brought about the change was Krister Stendahl. I owe him a great debt as I do his colleagues, both Jews and Christians, whose works influenced me in the early sixties. Among my local mentors, then and later, were Rabbi Dr John Levi and the late Rabbi Ronald Lubofsky.

At this point I wish to make three brief comments which may help to avoid any possible misunderstanding.

First, to say that I admire this or that particular trait within or aspect of Judaism is not to say that I do not recognize its possible parallel within Christianity or the existence of something similar within that faith. Yet, having said that, I should add that it is beyond doubt what is the likely source of

both.

Second: my approach to Judaism, which is obviously that of an outsider, is unquestionably eclectic. What I shall mention on this occasion betrays my own interests and these are those of a theologian. To the likely question: Why did he choose that and not such and such? my only plea is – personal predilection.

Third: I make little or no distinction between Judaism and the Jewish people. It was difficult to do otherwise for there is no Judaism without the Jewish people and, in the clear light of history, one has to say that there is no Jewish people, identifiable as such, without Judaism.

It is true that the after-life, the World to Come, does have a central place in traditional Judaism. It is there, certainly, in the late biblical period and, at times, within the long ensuing history of Judaism it has been presented as a touchstone of belief. Yet one can discern from earliest times until late a clear and unequivocal emphasis upon this life, the here and now, the world that is, as something that is important beyond measure.

Jewish interpretation of the early chapters of the book of Genesis has consistently highlighted the statement that the world of God's creation and the earthly life given to human beings is not something from which we should flee but rather a challenge that has to be entered into and embraced. In the opening chapter of Genesis there appears the persistent refrain: "And God saw that it was "tov" – "good"".

There is no claim within the Jewish response to this that all is perfect. The chapters that

follow preclude such optimism. But the challenge to humanity is that what flows from this positive attitude towards the created order leads to a co-operative effort of the partners in creation, the divine and the human. There is a propensity for good in the latter but also a propensity for what is not good, for what is contrary to the divine will. I find it more satisfying to attempt to understand human nature and human action, not in terms of a determinative principle such as that of the traditional Christian notion of "The Fall" but, rather, in terms of the two inclinations to which human beings are subject, that is, the inclination towards good (the yetser ha-tov) and the inclination towards evil the yetser ha-ra. The notion of anything even faintly resembling that of "original sin" is, for me, quite unacceptable.

The emphasis within Judaism on the ultimate goodness of creation and on the divine/human co-operative endeavour goes some way to explaining the extraordinary contribution that Jews have made, when circumstances permitted, to so many areas of human activity. It is salutary to remember that this contribution has occurred despite the often tearful vicissitudes of Jewish history.

I can recall asking John Levi, some thirty or so years ago, why it was that the Jewish world had produced so many gifted violinists but not an equivalent number of pianists. His witty reply was: 'Well it is not so easy to carry a grand piano in and out of the ghetto'. The question is no longer apposite but the response has lost none of its pungency.

To what extent Jewish humour is drawn from Judaism itself I do not know. But I am sure that it is not unrelated to the positive attitude to life that is reflected in the Jewish interpretation of those definitive texts in Genesis and of their enduring influence in Rabbinic times and beyond. Survival became not a mere instinct but a religious imperative.

How does one otherwise account for the way in which Judaism has reinvented itself after major catastrophes which should have dictated its demise? I am referring not to the destruction of one Temple but of two, in 586 BCE and 70 CE. That of the first was followed by the religious revolution under Ezra with the constitutionalising of the Torah. The Roman destruction of the Second Temple saw the blossoming of Pharisaism into the rabbinical movement that defined the future shape of Judaism. In this, the institutions – even that of the synagogue – were of far less significance than the home and the table.

I once said to Dr John Bodycomb that I thought Christianity might have to learn from Judaism if it is to survive. What I had in mind then was what I have just referred to.

But what of the divine-human co-operation? May both elements be relied upon? When we reflect upon the state of the world, the violence, the greed, the injustice, the sheer inhumanity of some towards others, the fate of the homeless and the forgotten, the refugees and so on – when we reflect upon all this – there is a tendency to beat our breasts in contrition and to lay the blame solely at our own feet.

There is a tradition within Judaism – and one which I admire with a certain "holy envy" – which takes the Deity to task. I am now skating on thin theological ice.

What I am referring to is the practice of arguing with God. The progenitor of this is none other than the Father of the nation himself, Abraham, who takes up the cause of the doomed cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. It is present when Jacob wrestles with God and borders on blasphemy when the prophet Jeremiah accuses God of having enticed and overpowered him, of causing him to become a laughing-stock. The Psalmist protests again and again that he has been abandoned. There is in the book of Job, chapter 24, an intense critique of God's actions. Disappointingly, in the end, Job simply capitulates.

The practice of arguing with God finds its place in rabbinic writings, among some of the Hasidic masters, in the poetry of Bialik and, closer to our own time, in Elie Wiesel's *Trial of God*.

Closely related to this tradition of divine-human argumentation is what appears in Hebrew as 'haster panim', in English, "hiding the face". We speak a great deal about the revelation of God through the Sacred Scriptures and beyond. But there is frequent mention in the Hebrew Bible of the "hiddenness of God". I find this an intriguing concept. It is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the book of Isaiah (45:15): *'Truly you are a God who hides himself.'* It is to be found often in the Psalms where, on a number of occasions, it is introduced by the plaintive cry: *'How long, O Lord?'*. For example Psalm 89:46. *How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?*

Traditionally it is associated with the sins of the people. It is there that the blame is seen to lie and not with God. But the very use of the expression as denoting the anguished cry of the human heart in situations far beyond human control must open up other possibilities. Is there some contraction in the nature of God which leaves the latter at the mercy of those who act with the highest degree of human hubris? Could it be that omnipotence is no longer an attribute that we apply to the Deity without question? This is a theological issue which, of course, is not confined to Judaism but I suggest that its early appearance in Jewish sacred literature and its persistence in that tradition may point towards a more profound understanding of the divine-human encounter than we have hitherto openly canvassed.

There is another emphasis in Judaism that has always appealed to me. It has its initial expression, as we should expect, in the Bible. Its most succinct statement is in Deuteronomy 16:20: *Justice, and only justice you shall pursue . . .*

The contours of what is meant by justice in its social setting are clearly set out over and over again.

Those who are especially to be protected are the vulnerable within the community, not least the widow, the orphan and the stranger (ger), the resident alien (the refugee?)

Late in the first century of the Common Era Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel declared:

On three things does the world stand:

on justice

on truth

and on peace (*shalom*).

There was a tendency in earlier disputations between Jews and Christians for "love" and "justice" to be played off one against the other. It is worth noting that the divine command to "love one's neighbour as oneself" appears cheek by jowl with some of the most clamant calls for justice. Moreover, in Leviticus 19, justice is rescued from any tendency towards a sentimental bias by this provision:

. . . you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbour (Lev 19:15).

To be partial or to defer would be, of course, to undermine the very principle of justice.

In the 1960's and 70's many of the churches rediscovered the Hebrew prophets, not least Amos, with their strong demand for social justice. Indeed, this move within the churches became almost a fetish with less than disciplined use of the expression, 'the church's prophetic ministry.' What this does indicate, however, is that I am not the only Christian who has a holy envy for this aspect of Judaism.

The final point is one where I hesitate to go. To be frank, I have great difficulties with creeds! This is an area where I most certainly display a 'holy envy.'

I am aware that Judaism is not entirely free of might be called a creedal statement and I am aware also that over the years certain individuals, from Maimonides to Moses Mendelsohn, have formulated lists of religious principles or beliefs. However, these have remained, more or less, personal or individualistic contributions to overall Jewish religious thought. They have not received recognition or acceptance as anything that remotely resembles the declaration of any possible equivalent of a duly constituted Church Council. They tend to be of scholarly and historical interest only.

About thirty or so years ago a leading Australian churchman and theologian made the comment: "Now is not the time to be writing creeds".

Had I presence of mind I should have responded that no time is the time for writing a creed unless it meets the criteria of succinctness and dynamism.

Such a creedal statement – if one might so call it – is the historic Jewish Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God. The Lord is One or, as it might better be translated with Rashi and others: *The Lord is our God. The Lord alone*. Now, there is something that I really do envy! A Christian equivalent would gladden the heart and revive the soul!

Source: [Gesher](#).

See also [What I Admire in Christianity](#) by Rabbi John Levi.