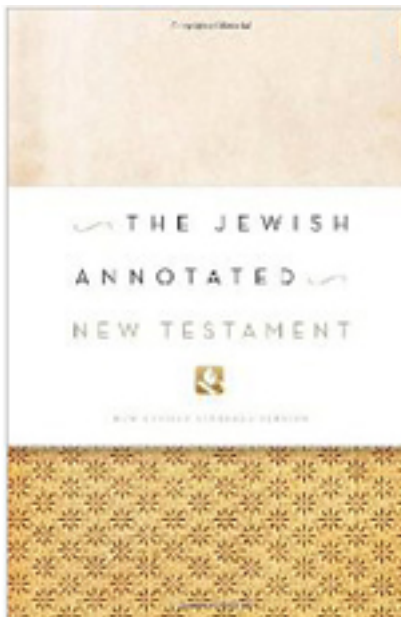


## Judaism Open to the Religions of the Nations: A Polish Catholic Theologian Reads an American Jewish Pluralist

31/03/2007 | Sikora, Piotr

**Book review of: Harold Kasimow, *The Search Will Make You Free: A Jewish Dialogue with World Religions*.**



## Judaism Open to the Religions of the Nations

A Polish Catholic Theologian reads an American Jewish Pluralist

[Piotr Sikora](#)

Harold Kasimow, *The Search Will Make You Free: A Jewish Dialogue with World Religions*.

Wydawnictwo WAM, Krakow, 2006

When recently I admitted having delivered a paper on interreligious dialogue at a theological

symposium, a Catholic priest taking part in the conversation asked with irony: "Is there anyone who would like to have dialogue with us?" The question was meant to suggest that while Christians have undertaken a lot of debate on interreligious dialogue and activities based on dialogue, people of other religions have not been eager to do so.

I do not know of any research on the degree of various religions' commitment to interreligious dialogue, but it is not true that Christians might not find partners for it. The examples are numerous. Here is one of them. I have just read a book by an American Jew who is very much involved in the practice of interreligious dialogue and also reflection on it. It is a collection of ten articles concerning Judaism in dialogue with world religions by Harold Kasimow, a student of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and professor at Grinnell College in Iowa.

The book is titled *The Search Will Make You Free*, which is a reference to the words ascribed to Jesus by the author of the Fourth Gospel: "The truth will make you free" (*St John* 8:32). The title, no doubt very inspiring, promises a little more than the book offers. Indeed, it is a record of the author's quest, which is manifest both in the themes and in the arrangement of the essays in the volume. We are not given a comprehensive study of the topic in a systematic complete form; rather, we are offered inspiring intuitions arranged in quite a loose order. Yet, among the topics, we do not find a deeper analysis of the quest and its connection with human freedom. Nevertheless, this collection contains a lot of material which may be interesting, and - what is more important - very inspiring for everyone who deals with interreligious dialogue.

Kasimow's essays contain several topics which, at first glance, do not seem interrelated. However, underlying them, there seems to be a principle organizing the author's thinking. It is the ethical vision of Judaism (and of any religion deserving its term), which he owes, as he says himself, to his upbringing at his family home, to his studies at a New York yeshiva connected with the Musar Movement started by Rabbi Israel Salanter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and aimed at an ethical self-development, and to his master, Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel. From this perspective, no religion is an end in itself. Rather, it should promote the formation of a human, helping him or her combine the passion of searching for the truth and compassion for all people, since according to Heschel's teaching, compassion-*pathos*-is the main attribute of God. Having adopted this viewpoint, Kasimow postulates the need to evaluate and reinterpret religious traditions, which, in the course of centuries, were not only ways to peace and sources for healing of the world but also ways to fanaticism, wars, and hatred.

Kasimow is convinced that the negative aspects of religions have originated in their absolutist and exclusivistic claims, that is, in the conviction that there is only one true religion and only one way of salvation. Thus, because of his deeply ethical motives, Kasimow declares himself to be a Jewish religious pluralist, someone who argues that God has chosen Jews to walk the way of the Torah, Christians to follow Christ, the Hindus to be guided by the Vedas, and Muslims to follow the way shown by the Qur'an.

Kasimow is aware that he should confront the prevailing Jewish theological evaluation of other religions. He recognizes that relatively few Jewish thinkers accept the challenge of this problem, but he knows that the traditional outlook of his fellow believers on this issue is rather exclusivistic. Even though it acknowledges the salvation of people observing the seven commandments given to Noah, it considers all non-Jewish religions to be false.

Kasimow's endeavor to justify his pluralist stand on Jewish grounds is very interesting and it may be extremely instructive for Christians as well, especially in those passages which he refers to from the Bible. There is a certain tension between Christians who are involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue who emphasize that Christianity is rooted in the Sinaitic Covenant and who highlight the unique character of that Covenant, and, on the other hand, scholars involved in dialogue with Asian religions who radicalize the "Pauline" tendency and proclaim that not only circumcision of

one's body is not necessary, but also that of the mind. They consider the Vedas to fulfill the role of the Hebrew Bible for the Hindus. Thus, we can learn a lot from a Jew who does not think that fidelity to the Sinitic Covenant on the part of non-Jews is a cause for exclusion and depreciation of the nations' religions.

Kasimow's justification of pluralism is based on three kinds of principles: theological (referring to God's image), ethical and epistemological. Drawing on tradition is also important. Kasimow demonstrates that as a pluralist he is not by himself, that it is possible to find rabbis, both in ancient and contemporary times, who in a way recognize the validity of the nations' religions. The main authority invoked by Kasimow is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

According to Kasimow, Heschel was a religious pluralist of his kind. Based on the ethical message of the Bible, Heschel believed that God is taking care of each human without leaving anyone to oneself. God's care aims at man's attaining the fullness of his or her humanity, sanctity, becoming a *mensch*. Such humans are encountered in all religions. Thus, using certain biblical and rabbinical texts, Heschel recognizes non-Jewish religions as also leading to God, because what is most important is not your convictions, but what kind of human you are. Heschel did not argue that all religions were the same. He appreciated the differences (e.g., he maintained that the teaching of Moses differed totally from the teaching of the Buddha), but he held the conviction that we should "immerse ourselves not so much in doctrines or in theology that divides humanity, but in "depth theology" - the act of believing which has the capacity to unite us."

Kasimow points to the fact that Heschel has followers. He refers to both Conservative and Orthodox rabbis who recognize the religions of the nations as true ways to God. A majority of the authors whom Kasimow quotes base their views on a conviction that God's love reaches everyone, and that He is infinitely greater than our conceptions of Him, so that it is idolatry to consider any understanding of God as ultimate. He also argues that discrepancies among religious convictions can be explained away by the fragmentary character of man's knowledge of God.

Besides being an interesting record of Kasimow's effort to justify a positive vision of the nations' religions, we also find his interesting essays concerning specific encounters of Judaism with other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Kasimow not only believes that the religions of the peoples can lead their followers to God, but he is also convinced that Jews themselves can draw on these traditions and, by doing this, enrich their Jewish faith. In a particularly intense way, Kasimow draws on oriental religions, and he does this without minimizing the serious differences between, for example, Hinduism or Buddhism and Judaism. Nevertheless, he precisely maps the areas of Jewish religiousness which can be enriched most in encounters with Asian religious systems.

Kasimow's reflections about Christianity should make Christians think a lot. Talking about Christianity, he focuses on John Paul II. The Pope fascinates him and remains a riddle to him because he sees John Paul II as both the greatest promoter of interreligious dialogue and at the same time the greatest Christian missionary of our time. Kasimow admires the practical commitment of the Pope, while at the same time he criticizes the Pope's views. Kasimow tries to understand the Pope's inclusivism as an attitude grown in the soil of Christian exclusivism, which, according to Kasimow, was a prevailing Christian attitude for centuries. His critical remarks are directed more at the Pope's view of Buddhism and Islam. Kasimow claims that the Pope's views of these traditions were influenced by reading the writings of Christian missionaries of the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than understanding how the believers themselves understood their religions. At the same time, he notes that Pope John Paul II spoke of non-Christian religions more favorably and more respectfully when meeting and addressing them directly than when expressing his thoughts in his more general doctrinal texts.

So critical an evaluation by an impartial, even if committed, witness, should be a clear warning to

us, since taking into consideration the authority of John Paul II, Catholics, especially in Poland, can easily repeat his mistakes in contacts with other religions. Anyway, John Paul II does not seem to be quite an exception; it is quite common to formulate statements on others without having listened to them previously. The Second Vatican Council spoke on other religions, for example, in the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, but it did not invite the representatives of those religions to say who they were and what they believed.

On the other hand, reading Kasimow's remarks we can notice what others perceive as positive in our attitude toward other religions. However, it should inspire our reflection when even an open Jew like Harold Kasimow, who tells us how much he can - even as a pious Jew - gain by listening to the message of other religions, does not mention a word on whether Christian doctrine might be enriching to him.

Of course, the fact that Kasimow does not see anything enriching in the Christian doctrine could be more his than our fault. Personally, I would be pleased to talk with him about it. After all, there would be more questions I would ask him. For example, his essays, which are interesting and inspire one's thinking, often treat issues perfunctorily and leave simply invite questions.

For example, what kind of epistemological status does Kasimow ascribe to his pluralistic declaration that God chose Jews to follow the way of the Torah, Christians to follow Christ, and the Hindus to follow the Vedas? Does this statement express a universal truth, obligatory to all, which should be accepted by others, as well? If so, one can say that, as a matter of fact, Kasimow's pluralism is a camouflaged inclusivism: it takes for granted that there is a God who chooses people. This is a belief that makes sense only on the grounds of biblical religions. Buddhists and Hindus would not recognize themselves in the statement. This is a similar objection that J. Hick faced once, who, having acknowledged its validity, gave up using the term "God." He came to the conclusion that the category of a personal God (who can, for example, choose someone for something) is just a perspective-dependent, culturally conditioned description of a phenomenological experience of something which in itself is The Real, neither personal nor impersonal. Is Kasimow inclined to follow Hick or would he try to solve this problem otherwise? How?

There is another issue connected with this problem. Kasimow emphasizes simultaneously the following. First, various religions contain many irreducible differences, both doctrinal and existential. They lead, among other things, to various kinds of experiences. Here, Kasimow gives as an example his own experience in zazen (Buddhist meditation), which is something different from what he experiences at a Yom Kippur service. Therefore, much different religions are (or, at least, can be) ways to salvation. At this point, however, one might ask: what is that salvation, the aim that the different religions are pursuing? Do any of the religions describe it in a better way? Is it, for example, union with God? Or Extinction/Nirvana? Is the aim of all religions one? Then how can we explain how here "on earth" the traditions, which interpret the world so differently, and lead to so much varying experiences and ways of life, should ultimately lead people to the same goal? What is the relation between the religious experience accessible in this life and the transcendent ultimate end? And yet, maybe the "pre-ultimate" differences are reducible, maybe it is possible to identify the common "core" of religion also at the "pre-ultimate" stage? (Such a solution is implied in Heschel's teaching, referred to by Kasimow with approval, that "we must now immerse ourselves ... in "depth theology" understood as the act of believing which has the capacity to unite us.") Yet perhaps we should go in the opposite direction and admit - as, for example, S. M. Heim does - that there are many different ultimate aims, many "salvations" to which different religions guide people? Adopting this solution eliminates some problems, such as the difficulty of reconciling religious eschatologies. For example, the one proclaiming salvation as union with personal God and the one proclaiming the ultimate character of Nirvana. On the other hand, other problems appear then (e.g., the difficulty with proving the possibility of many ultimate ends for the people having one human nature). There are many such questions, and there are even more possible

answers. However, they are not asked by Kasimow. It would be hard to conclude from his collection of essays what answers he would be likely to give.

One can say, of course, that my demand for the answers flows from my overemphasis on having the truth at the cost of the very quest for it. I would defend myself by saying that each answer given inspires new questions. Questions will remain with us forever. We shall be searchers till the end of our lives.

Piotr Sikora is Assistant Professor at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Krakow, Poland.

This review was published in the Polish Catholic monthly *Znak*, 621 (2) 2007. Translated from the Polish by Violetta Reder.