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Reading *Jewish Theology and World Religions* from the Perspective of a Dialogical Theology from a Jewish Vantage Point

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Abstract
The article discusses the volume *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn. It depicts its core contents, presenting them in light of the relatively new discipline of interreligious or dialogical theology that challenges exclusivist and inclusivist approaches to other religions. The lines between a nonexclusivist theology of religions present in the volume and a pluralist, dialogical world theology described in the article are not clear-cut. In fact, many ideas and concepts found in *Jewish Theology and World Religions* lead in the direction of a pluralist theology of religions. I argue that what is needed today is not only a revisited confessional Jewish theology, but also and foremost a dialogical theology from a Jewish vantage point that values the uniqueness of the religious Other and promotes a religiosity based on human rights and a shared humanity.

Keywords Jewish theology · World religions · Interreligious theology · Dialogical theology

Little has been written in the field of the dialogical theology of religions from a Jewish viewpoint. The various contributors to *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (Goshen-Gottstein and Korn 2012)[1] further the case for a theology of religions, and I greatly value their achievements in as far as they recognize the validity of other religions. This article goes a step further in complementing and challenging their views from the vantage point of dialogical theology, whose content as well as method is dialogue. I situate the different contributions in *Jewish Theology and World Religions* within the broader framework of a Jewish pluralist theology that adopts multiperspectivism and thus, to my mind, greatly advances interreligious

[1] For a review of the book, see Meir (2013).

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dialogue. The lines between the nonexclusivist theology of religions presented in the volume and the pluralist, dialogical world theology described in this article are not clear-cut. In fact, many ideas and concepts found in *Jewish Theology and World Religions* steer in the direction of a pluralist theology of religions. I invite the readership to enlarge the horizon and consider the advantages of a full-fledged dialogical theology founded on the basis of a new approach to the theological Other. After depicting the core contents of *Theology and World Religions*, I will discuss them in light of the relatively new discipline of interreligious or dialogical theology that challenges exclusivist and inclusivist approaches to other religions.

On the Urgency of Dialogical Theology

The duality of religions, which may either contribute to civilization or to a clash of civilizations, urges us to conceive of religions as resources for the construction of dialogical societies. Religions add fuel to conflict and tensions by qualifying other religions as untrue or deficient in comparison with one's own religion. However, they also serve peaceful goals if they recognize that other religions have their own salvific path to transcendent reality. Conceptualizing religions as containing the potential for peace implies avoiding apologetics and polemics that result from an exclusivist position. It further entails refraining from ridiculing or demeaning religious Others and adopting an attitude that takes into account religious differences as well as communalities. A genuine exploration and appreciation of other religious paths without a sense of the superiority of one's own religion over all the others calls for a new, dialogical theology that values the dialogical elements in the various religions and discards traditional positions that discredit and disgrace religious Others. Exploring and valuing other religions corrects a widespread religious stance that distorts other religions or only recognizes partial truth in them, while asserting that the entire truth rests solely in one's own religion. In the process of becoming pluralistic or interreligious, one cannot escape the transformation of one's own belief. In theology, we have not yet arrived at the stage of adopting a viewpoint in which one's own way of looking at the world is recognized as only *a* way, which becomes transformable and correctable in contact with other religious ways. It would be a grave misjudgment to see salvation in one's own religion while neglecting other salvific ways also linked to transcendent reality. This is tantamount to affirming one's superiority over all religious Others.

Unfortunately, Cyprian's exclusivist position, expressed in the saying *salus extra ecclesiam non est*, is present in other religions as well. The exclusivist position is still widely endorsed in the religions of the world. A more inclusivist stance claims the superiority of one's own while recognizing fragments of truth in other religions. Inclusivists do not think that religions are *equally* valid. Dialogical theology, on the other hand, adopts a pluralist view that sees religious Others as equally valid and maintains that one's own position does not remain unchanged while engaging in dialogue with religious Others. In the course of dialogue, pluralist theologians learn from religious Others and eventually may criticize their own religion or other

religions. It is from this perspective that I value the various articles in the book edited by Goshen-Gottstein and Korn as a step in the direction of a truly pluralist theology.

Openness to Religious Others

Jewish Theology and World Religions includes theological reflections on Jewish identity, Jewish norms concerning other religions, and Jewish relations with religious Others. Many basic questions are raised on the nature of identity, truth, general and particular revelation, *avodah zarah* (idolatry), creation, and the Jewish "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6), as well as on relativism, pluralism, and dialogue. The laudable volume focuses on classical sources and viewpoints. New perspectives are also offered, and there is a sincere search for possible inspiration from other religions.

A number of contributors to the volume look for sources in the Jewish tradition that may lead to greater theological openness. Some think that Messianic perspectives could become inclusive and that giving a place to other religions in an eschatological perspective enables a horizon from which other forms of religious life are recognized and valued.[2] Likewise, the notion of the seven Noachide commandments (*sheva miẓvot bene noah*), which outline a basic ethical code that precedes Abraham, is cited as highly inspirational by some authors (Jospe 2012, 94; Korn 2012, 193–4). Fenton notes, for instance, that Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237) offers inspiration in that he humbly recognized his own imperfection by incorporating the ideas of the Sufis, whose teachings were Jewish, but lost to the Jews over the course of time (Fenton 2012, 248). Other rabbinic figures have similarly developed interreligious thoughts. A good example is Rabbenu Tam (1100–1171), who deemed that Christianity is not *ʾavodah zarah*, since Christians observe the Noachide commandments and are allowed what is forbidden to Jews: to worship another being next to God (*shituf*) (Korn 2012, 198, 202). Rabbi Menahem Me'iri (1249–1306) did not consider Islam and Christianity to be *avodah zarah*, since these religions promote an ethical life (Goshen-Gottstein 2012c, 8, 13–14, 17, 22–23; Korn 2012, 195–197). In the eighteenth century the German rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) also developed a positive attitude towards Christianity, since it could spread the Noachide commandments among non-Jews (Korn 2012, 199–200 and 210–11). It is no wonder that the visionary positions of these rabbis encourage scholars who are interested in developing a dialogical theology of world religions that presents an alternative way for religions to relate to each other.

[2] Goshen-Gottstein (2012a, 325) notes that the messianic perspective perhaps "also relativizes our own hold on the truth."

The Question of Belonging

Many questions remain after reading this book. My main question from the standpoint of the discipline of dialogical theology concerns the nature of the relationship between belonging to a specific group and belonging to humanity as such. A "Jewish theology of religions" is not yet a "dialogical theology from a Jewish standpoint." A coherent dialogical theology from a Jewish standpoint requires a broader perspective. I focus on the possibility and necessity of the development of such a theology, one that calls for a real dialogue between Judaism and other religions while recognizing that one's own position is always constricted by one's viewpoint. The vantage point of many inclusivists is from their own religion to religious Others and not the other way around. However, dialogical theology as a sustained reflection on the interaction between differing religious persons goes in both directions: from the self to the Other and vice versa. It is—in the words of Dan Cohn Sherbok—God-centric rather than Judeo-centric (Cohn-Sherbok 1994, 125).

Unobtainable, indescribable transcendence is experienced from varied religious vantage points, which all color transcendent reality and contribute to its rich display in innumerable human experiences. The subjective situatedness of believers cannot be denied and has to be taken into account in dialogical theology. Yet the goal of dialogical theology is to become conscious of the interdependence of religions and their interactions, in view of a more peaceful society. Dialogical theology acknowledges that human beings belong to particular groups as well as to the world at large. If belonging to humankind is taken seriously, one has to stop regarding other religions as inferior, deficient paths and start humbly admitting that other religions do not have to be measured according to one's own doctrinal standards. Dialogical theology, also called world theology or global theology, surmises that in the vast diversity of their relationships to the transcendent, all religions potentially contribute to the well-being of humankind as such. Hierarchical thinking and colonial deliberation about the "true" religion will be avoided in favor of an appreciation of religions for their own value. The challenge of dialogical theology lies in its openness to the different experiences of the transcendent in all religions.

Christians were the first to develop such a discipline. John Hick (1922–2012), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000), Paul Knitter, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel are notable in this regard (Hick 2001; Knitter 2002; Smith 1967, 1979, 1989; Schmidt-Leukel 2017a, b). From the Jewish side, little has been produced in this growing field, although there are quite positive steps in that direction. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, for instance, deems that the Absolute allows the existence of diverse and even contradicting faiths. This is a shift from a Newtonian universe with only one center point, to an Einsteinian one in which many center points exist (Greenberg 2004). For Greenberg, "God has many messengers" and there is a "universal divine covenant with humanity" (Greenberg 2000, 155, 158). I share Greenberg's pluralism, but dialogical theology goes a step further in the direction of real interaction between religions. In dialogical theology, the discovery of

enriching elements in other religions may eventually lead to a revision and even a reimagining or recreation of one's own tradition. In dialogical theology, religions are interrelated in view of the creation of peaceful societies.

There is a profound need for investigating traditional sources that are relevant for a positive Jewish attitude towards other religions. A dialogical interpretation of traditional Jewish sources contributes to opening up Judaism to other religions and to promoting pluralism from a Jewish vantage point. The development of a multiperspectival and dialogical hermeneutics of religious sources is the task of the day. Happily, by contextualizing rulings and customs, scholars of religion have prevented adherents from absolutizing their own standpoint and confusing it with absolute reality itself. In an interreligious theology, contextualization leads to revisiting commonly accepted interpretations and earlier positions. Given that interfaith relations have become more and more ubiquitous as a result of globalization, situating texts and customs in their historical and cultural contexts promotes healthy relativization of religious life and opens it up to transformational dialogue. *Jewish Theology and World Religions* does not lack a contextualization of theological views. Indeed, its various articles contain many good ideas, which go beyond a traditional confessional theology and in the direction of dialogical theology.

For example, if we apply the lens of dialogical theology, gurus as incarnations of the Divine are not as problematic as they are from the perspective of traditional Jewish theology. For a pluralist world theology that values the varied experiences of the transcendent, questioning whether Hinduism is monotheist is not critically important. Whereas a traditional Jewish theology may discuss the halakhic aspects of wigs that originated in Hindu temples, a dialogical or interreligious theology changes that perspective by appreciating the Hindu practice of offering hair to a deity. Dialogical theology is a Copernican revolution; one's own religion is no longer at the center, since one tries to understand the Other as she understands herself. In a world theology that respects the different experiences of the transcendent and learns from them, one does not have to give up one's own position, but one has to know that there are many other positions that do not have to be judged by one's own dogmatic standards. The way one assesses the other's religion has implications for how one views one's own religion. A dialogical interpretation of the plurality of religions abandons the dream of an eschatological victory of one's own religion over the other religions and embraces the possibility of mutual enrichment.

Decentralization and Self-criticism

Endorsing a pluralist vision as proposed by dialogical theology is a transformative experience. In the past, Judaism often perceived other religions as highly problematic. The religious Other was and is frequently judged and depicted negatively. In the book I discuss here, Ruth Langer rightly observes that Jewish ritual memory of the Other is almost always negative and that this presents a serious challenge for all those who engage in bridge building (Langer 2012, 170). Indeed, our increasingly globalized society brings us in greater contact with other religious narratives and with religious Others who look for recognition and acceptance. Travel possibilities,

migration, and the media allow us to know and enter into dialogue with the religious Other. Both in everyday encounters with religious Others as well as in our theological reflections on the plurality of religious experiences, we need deep listening, epistemological humility, and a nonjudgmental attitude. Religious Others frequently ask critical questions concerning our own religious experience and urge us to review previous standpoints, foremost on *avodah zarah*. If we take up this challenge posed by others, we will have to reformulate or reimagine our approaches to what John Hick calls Ultimate Reality, which can only be adequately approached from a multiperspective focus.

Dialogical theology tries to understand religious Others as they want to be understood. Of course, there are limits to dialogue if violence is involved (Meir 2019b, 214–222). Yet, this limitation does not impede us from looking for common elements among the religions, without neglecting differences. In a dialogical theology, translatability is necessary and yet, not everything in other religions is compatible with or reducible to the epistemological framework of one specific religion. The search for a truth accepted by all is less central to a dialogical theology than the search for peace, to which religions may contribute. Such a peace is not served if one sticks to exclusivist positions, in which one's own religion is viewed as surpassing all others, which are qualified as errors or lies. The authors who contributed to *Jewish Theology and World Religions* are far removed from such a view; they are open to religious Others.

Truth

Multiperspectivism *in religiosis*, depicted above as the basis of dialogical theology, may lead to the recognition that the ultimate truth is not the possession of one particular religious community and that all religions reflect aspects of the unreachable transcendence. From this perspective, it becomes necessary to learn from other religious persons in order to approach what is ultimately unutterable. Nobody has a monopoly on God's view. No finite perspective apprehends the infinite.

Primarily, dialogical theology, as I conceive it, emphasizes the ethical dimension of religions, which binds them together.[3] From a religious-humanistic perspective, religions are viewed as valuable in as far as they contribute to the improvement of human society. In other words, the "truth" of the various religions is measured in accordance with their "attitude" towards or effectiveness in promoting the formation of a peaceful society. The Me'iri already understood this, as Goshen-Gottstein remarks (Goshen-Gottstein 2012a, 326). Precisely, a deed-centered religion such as Judaism could contribute to an approach to "truth" that focuses on relations between human beings and that "sprouts from the earth" (Psalms 82:12). A dialogical theology understands the "truth" of religions differently from the past and associates it with moral purposes. In this new deed-centered world theology, one may study

[3] For a concept of dialogical theology, in which religious truth is associated with ethical deeds, see Meir (2019a).

various theological assertions, but it is even more vital to search for the "truth" that is a result of fructuous interreligious dialogues. From this perspective, the effectiveness and value of a religion is measured according to the ethical viewpoint and behavior of its adherents. Truth, understood as existential trust, is linked to one's moral behavior. *Emet*, the Hebrew word for truth, and *emunah*, faith, are linked to *imun*, which means trust. One has to trust that religious Others also have their own access to the transcendent, from which one may learn, theoretically and existentially. Global theology ultimately seeks the well-being of all, with respect for alterity. The accent is on moral progress. Who has a monopoly on this? From the perspective of dialogical theology, religions are a legitimate undertaking in as far as they improve the human condition.

Assimilation and Dissimilation

The aim of interreligious theology is certainly not to develop a metareligion, a unifying category in which Otherness is overcome. On the contrary, Otherness is recognized as a presupposition for dialogue, in which learning and transformation are central. Dialogical theology avoids the Scylla of radical dissimilation in which connections with religious Others are avoided and condemned as well as the Charybdis of radical assimilation that forgets the distinctiveness of each and every religion.

A dialogical theology appreciates different experiences of the transcendent. It presupposes that religions each have their own way to a transcendent reality. Avoiding rivalry and animosity, it allows for a more relaxed view on religious Others, who are also witnesses to the Higher Reality and whose way of living could be complementary to our own. In interreligious encounter and dialogue, the bond with, rather than a priori demeaning of, religious Others is necessary if we aim to desist from conceiving of God as an exclusivist who privileges certain groups over others.

A Future-Centered Theology

For the reasons mentioned above it has become imperative to develop not only a praxis of interreligious dialogue, but also a dialogical theology from a Jewish perspective. It is not enough to reflect on how Judaism has viewed religious Others in the past. In the developing field of interreligious theology, dialogue is less a discussion about central truths in a certain normative tradition than the establishment of mutual trust and understanding. In my understanding, it is also more about ordinary life and attitudes than about cognition. Dialogical theology looks to the future, which has to be shaped in cooperation with religious Others, with whom one can mend the world. Faithfulness is not only about the past—it is foremost related to the common task of shaping the future. The Austrian Jewish composer Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) remarked that tradition is not the adoration of ashes, but the preservation of fire. As I remarked at the start of this article, the object of dialogical theology is interreligious meeting and dialogue; dialogue is also its method. In this perspective, religious interaction and reflection on it challenges traditional

theological thinking. Mutual interaction and criticism are necessary for a vital and dialogical Judaism of the future, as Abraham Maimonides acknowledged in his time. The Other cannot be reduced to the same. He or she also shapes, challenges, and transforms one's own religious identity, which is seen in dialogical theology as a developing process and a changing construct rather than as something fixed once and for all.

The contributors to *Jewish Theology and World Religions* discuss how Judaism relates to Others, manifesting an openness to the religious Other. One may go a step further and build an interreligious theology, which cannot thrive without a dialogical hermeneutics of the sources and a courageous revisiting of traditional Jewish standpoints and decisions concerning religious Others. Alon Goshen-Gottstein rightly reminds us of the urgency of understanding religious documents and positions in their historical contexts (Goshen-Gottstein 2012a, 321–322). As I have noted, that is already an important step in the direction of a dialogical theology. Indeed, if one considers the historical context of customs and decisions, but also the context of all contexts—that of interreligious dialogue—one may review former positions in light of the challenge of interreligious encounters today.

Pluralism

The discussion in the book between Raphael Jospe and Jolene and Menachem Kellner shows that we are still very much within denominational theology and have a long way to go before we will create a dialogical theology. Jospe pleads for a Jewish pluralism and finds support for his standpoint in the Jewish tradition. He avoids moral relativism as well as extreme epistemological relativism. Contra Jospe, the "Maimonidean thinkers"[4] Jolene and Menachem Kellner argue that Jewish theology does not allow for religious pluralism at all, and that there are no precedents in Jewish tradition for relativistic pluralism. They do not see how somebody who defends pluralism can formulate a Jewish argument against assimilation or religious syncretism. The Kellners refer to Maimonides, who held truth to be one, objective and unchanging (Kellner and Kellner 2012, 124). Interestingly, in his defense of the pluralist thesis Jospe also refers to the Rambam, more specifically to his idea that the Torah had to adapt its manner of expression to limited human understanding (Jospe 2012, 107).

In this controversy, I definitely side with Jospe's position. An argument in support comes from the Rambam, who wrote in his *Eight Chapters*, his introduction to *Pirkei Avot*: "Accept the truth from he who says it" (*sh'ma haemet mimi sheamra*). This implies that the outlooks of Others definitely count in our attempt to reach truth and that without their perspectives we do not reach a full understanding of transcendent reality.

[4] Goshen-Gottstein (2012a, 326).

Dialogical Philosophy

Meeting and conversation imply the recognition of alterity. As Stanislaw Krajewski and Meir Sendor clearly expound in their refined contributions, approaching the Other is never a question of knowledge, but first of all a matter of hospitality and a respectful attitude (Krajewski 2012, 143–145; Sendor 2012, 161–164). I would wish that more such reflections were present in the volume, since contemporary Jewish dialogical philosophers contribute immensely to the construction of a theology in which differences are recognized and in which "trans-different" meetings become possible through communication, mutual learning, bridging, and translating. The Jewish understanding of "truth" as confidence and trust could transform a battle between people with different cognitive views into a community of people who put moral behavior first, accept differences, and go beyond them in reaching out to Others and being inspired by them.

Developing a philosophy in which alterity is the kernel of subjectivity helps to construct an interreligious theology. Such a theology not only accepts, but also promotes the Other on the basis of the Other's irreducible uniqueness. I attempted to construct such a theology in my book on interreligious theology moored in modern Jewish philosophy, and in its sequel *Becoming Interreligious* (Meir 2015; 2017). Instead of denigrating or negating the Other, one could welcome her. Instead of making an idol of one's own world, one could open oneself up to the Other whose Otherness should not be neutralized in our own totality. This project builds a future that involves permanent dialogue for the sake of peaceful coexistence. We need an interreligious theology in which all learn from all *beyond* confessional boundaries that are always too narrow. A new theology of Otherness and a dialogical theology replaces the old solipsistic theologies of exclusion and suspicion. Criteria for the authenticity of such a dialogical theology will be that people do not hurt Others and are ready to see the Other not as threatening, but as necessary in order to approach what is ultimately ineffable. Religions have too often exacerbated conflicts; the time is ripe to realize the truth of Jonathan Sacks's utterance: "If religion is not part of a solution, it will certainly be part of the problem" (Sacks 2003, 9).

I wonder if one may be religious today without being linked to Others in an interreligious way, beyond the frontiers of one's own religion.[5] It was Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), whose thoughts are almost absent in the volume under review,[6] who claimed that no religion is an island (Heschel 1966). Although he narrowed the gamut mainly to Judaism and Christianity, this very idea is to my mind a cornerstone for a future interreligious theology beyond denominational theologies.

Of course, dialogue has its limits when violence is involved. A critical distance from violence, whether or not caused or bolstered by religion, is necessary. In no situation should violence be tolerated. It is often necessary to critique bad behavior and reject humiliating theories about religious Others. But the possibility of

[5] The title of P.C. Phan's book expresses this idea in a clear way: *Being Religious Interreligiously. Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, Phan 2004.

[6] But see Krajewski 2012, 147.

peaceful dialogue in which people see each other as equal partners that enrich each other remains a lofty human undertaking. The dignity of the human being is in her capacity to relate to the Other.

Spiritual Enrichment

Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman's more personal article shows how one may become inspired by another world view. He writes that his familiarity with Buddhist practices has enhanced his religious sensibilities. Reminiscent of Paul Knitter's conjoining of Christianity and Buddhism (Knitter 2009), Gellman learns from Buddhism that there are ideas that are not worthy of consideration. The Buddha set metaphysical issues aside as unproductive on the path to liberation and illumination (Gellman 2012, 303). A sutra warns Buddhists that doctrines may become something to fight for (302). Buddhism also teaches him that anguish results from the inability to calmly and serenely accept the facts of human existence (308). Gellman further learns from Buddhism that belief in God may feed one's ego and satisfy the personal needs of the self (309). He finally sees a parallel between the Buddhist nonself and the chasidic *bitul hayesh*, the annulling of the self, in favor of the *Ayin*, the nothingness of the infinite (312–13). In relating how Buddhism inspires his own spiritual flourishing, Gellman points in the direction of a dialogical theology in which the interaction between religions is vital and in which all learn from all.

Buddhism is of course attractive to many religious people today. Young people in Israel go to the Far East after their army service and are impressed by Buddhist spirituality. There is the phenomenon of "Jubus," as well as the American Renewal Movement that integrates meditation into ritual practice. Many Buddhist teachers are Jews. In the perspective of a dialogical theology, the Buddhist concept of peace could influence the Jewish concept of *shalom*, since in Buddhism peace is first of all inner peace of the mind, whereas in Judaism, peace is linked more closely to an active life. Buddhist elements can easily and successfully be integrated in Judaism, because outer and inner peace are interconnected (Meir 2015, 50–61).

Dialogical theology holds that Judaism may learn from other world views and religions and integrate elements from them. For example, a patriarchal conception of the Deity characteristic for a certain form of Judaism may be challenged in contact with Hinduism, which has no problem at all imagining the Divine as feminine. Interreligious learning thus can enable Judaism to overcome patriarchy. Certain Jewish groups that stay away from earthly pleasure may learn from the Hindu *lila*, the joyful, nonutilitarian activity in Hinduism that is not opposed to obligations, and can be translated as "divine play." A dialogical theology is attentive to parallels and differences and works with deep listening, pure presence, hospitality, learning, and translation.

On one's spiritual journey one may learn from Others. So, for instance, although one may know the value of mercy from the Jewish tradition, contact with Buddhists and the elevated reality of *karuna* may cause Jews to realize the profound significance of this value in their life. One may look at a known quality with fresh eyes.

Mercy as the result of the recognition of the interconnectedness of all may throw fresh new light on an ancient value that one knows from one's own tradition.

Parallels

In an interreligious theology, one discovers that surprising parallels are present in different systems. Are the Levinasian approach of the I as "Here I am" (*hineni*; Genesis 22:1, 7, 11) and the Buberian concept of the I as a between-person far removed from the Buddhist ideas of interbeing and interconnectedness of all, in which walls, barriers, and obstacles between the self and the Other are made porous or are broken down by means of meditation?

The Buddhist knowledge that everything flows, is in permanent change, and influences everything else, runs parallel with the Jewish idea of a world-embracing responsibility without limits. I see in the Buddhist compassion that follows from the insight of interconnectedness a parallel to the idea of the Jewish Messianic Suffering Servant, who, with infinite responsibility, takes upon himself the burden of the world.

True, Judaism and Buddhism have different languages and represent separate ways leading to the top of the mountain, but there are apparently paths that link the Buddhist path with the Jewish one. Can one deny the existence of such connecting paths? Can one avoid the fact that people experiment with other ways of thinking that potentially enrich their spirituality? Embracing (aspects of) Buddhism is not necessarily the result of a New Age mentality in which one superficially adopts elements of other world views without realizing the depth of doing so. Neither is it necessarily the result of a poor or deficient knowledge of Judaism (although that may be the case). Rather, it could lead people to real interculturality, in which the art of translation is central.

New Perspectives

In interaction with religious Others, one becomes spiritually enriched and encounters bold new perspectives on one's own religion. There are different angles from which the Ultimate Reality can be seen. One may change one's own world vision from contact with other religions, borrow ideas, take up practices from religious Others, and integrate them in the home tradition. One may even adopt a different religious viewpoint and reorganize or reorient one's life. If religions are not perceived as closed entities, one may see how they mutually influence each other. Historically, religions borrowed from each other and, in that sense, they were never pure. They may contradict each other; they also may complement each other and bring unexpected spiritual vistas. As noted, Jewish activism finds its welcome correction in meditative Buddhism and vice versa. In any case, one cannot know oneself without the Other. Only within religious diversity may one become conscious of the specificity of Judaism. However, interreligious dialogue is not only about knowing oneself, but also about becoming aware that one is always a spiritual pilgrim who

may appreciate the many landscapes that one passes on one's way to Ultimate Reality. Should one not learn from the Hindu tradition in which Brahman is equally and identically present in all, a standpoint that perceives a possessive attitude, hatred, or greed as a lack of profound knowledge?[7] Should one deny the presence of humanism and of holiness in other religions and world views?

Judaism and Present-Day World Religions

It is laudable that some articles in *Jewish Theology and World Religions* discuss how Judaism can relate to present-day world religions. Eugene Korn, for instance, mentions the distance of today's Christianity from classical supersessionism and how Christian theologies changed after the Holocaust (Korn 2012, 204–209). In their relation to other religions, Jews may consider reevaluating ancient religious insights. Korn argues that from a Jewish perspective, *avodah zarah* is a legal term: it can be "foreign," unacceptable for one community, while not for another (202–3). He mentions that some *Rishonim* (Me'iri and Rabbenu Tam) and many *Aḥaronim* considered Christianity a valid religion for non-Jews, and beneficial for the world (202). Korn is optimistic in his belief that Jews who value openness to Western culture and appreciate Christianity's moral and spiritual values can find ample halachic justification for this viewpoint. His endeavor to open up Judaism to Christianity is the result of a broader vista and goes in the direction of dialogical theology.

Paul Fenton describes different defense mechanisms Jews have adopted and discusses the influence of Islam on Judaism. He concludes that the "banished brother" Ishmael could again become a member of the Abrahamic family (Fenton 2012, 261). The uncovering of obstacles to openness and the wish to bring Judaism and Islam into discussion with each other very much fits a dialogical theology that intends to diminish biases against religious Others.

Alon Goshen-Gottstein's contribution on Judaism and Hinduism is also important in that there has been little written that does not presume preconceived ideas on Hinduism as a religious system (Goshen-Gottstein 2012b). He describes the philosophy of the Advaita Vedanta, which recognizes the unity of all beings and sees diversity, also in the Divine, as secondary (266–267). For Goshen-Gottstein, the perspective of Advaita Vedanta challenges the Jewish view on Hinduism as *avodah zarah*, since it holds that one in fact worships different representations of one God (*ekam sat*). He labels the directness of India's approach to God as attractive to Jews, who focus rather on study, happiness, family life, and the well-being of their own group (271). The Hindu concept of *Japa*—the repetition of God's name—makes God available and recognizable in all. More than in any other article, Goshen-Gottstein raises the questions of the redefinition of *avodah zarah* and of the understanding of *shituf* ("association" with God) as forbidden or allowed. Reimagining Judaism in its

[7] Working with the idea of Brahman as equally present in all, Anantanand Rambachan has written an admirable Hindu theology of liberation (Rambachan 2015).

relation to Others is one of the crucial tasks of a dialogical theology from a Jewish viewpoint.

If one takes apophantic or negative theology seriously, that is, if one admits that the Ultimate Reality is inconceivable, not at our disposal, and beyond our own perceptions of it, one may start to understand that Others too have their own perceptions of it and that these perceptions cannot and should not be reduced to one's own limited perspective. True, we cannot meet others without interpreting them, but our interpretation always has to respect and promote the Otherness of the religious Other, who has her own experience of the transcendent and her own legitimate way to reach goodness and holiness on her journey to what remains ineffable and unconceivable. The problem resides in the illegitimate curbing of the infinite in finite concepts that are presumed to be the definitive expressions of Ultimate Reality itself.

Conclusion: Religions as "Fingers"

Jewish Theology and World Religions discusses many aspects of Judaism's relation to other religions, and the different contributions show an openness to the religious Other. The book's focus on factual descriptions of Judaism's approach to other religions demands a theological analysis that is future-, Other-, and peace-centered. In Abraham Joshua Heschel's felicitous phrasing, identifying religion with God himself is idolatry (Heschel 1996, 243). All religions refer to the Higher Reality, without fully reaching it. Openness to other cultures should be seen from this perspective. It is not unfaithful to Judaism for a Jew to engage in a permanent learning process in which contact with Others' salvific ways enriches one's own spirituality. As Perry Schmidt-Leukel writes, religions are, in Zen Buddhist parlance, only the "fingers" that point to the moon, or, in Muslim parlance: God is "greater" (*akbar*). Openness to the world in all its diversity brings with it necessary changes and a blurring of overly rigid boundaries. One may be nurtured by Judaism and still drink from other wells in order to quench one's religious thirst. Rather than claiming the whole person, religion is what gives life meaning and sense. I agree with Schmidt-Leukel, who perceives religion as a "signpost" and "tour guide" (Schmidt-Leukel 2008). Dialogical theology opens a window to a perspective on religions as there for the human being and not vice versa, and as functioning for the sake of a peaceful, pluralist society. The words of *Pirkei Avot*, "Who is wise? The one who learns from every other person" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1) are of great relevance for any encounter with religious Others, which inevitably changes the partners in dialogue.

Dialogical theology claims that Judaism is not superior to other religions and, consequently, that it has to cope seriously with the fact of religious diversity. It has to humbly define its own position within the mosaic of religions, without exclusivism or feelings of supremacy. The recognition of a plurality of religions changes our ways of thinking about Ultimate Reality, around which religions shape their adherents' lives. A radical rethinking as a result of this recognition will lead to a Jewish theology of pluralism, which may be informed by pluralistic openness attested in the sources and in the writings of Jewish thinkers. One's absolute truth claim and one's own triumphant position will make place for the understanding that all

religions are human organizations that may learn from each other. If religions fail to do this, they will remain contributors to what Samuel P. Huntington called a clash of civilizations and a divided world without respect for the religiosity of religious Others. Of course, a pluralist or dialogical theology will retain its Jewish character when it is performed by Jewish theologians. But the celebration of plurality will definitely change our point of view. In the encounter and dialogue with religious Others, Jewish self-understanding will necessarily be remodeled and transfigured. In the interaction with religious Others, one may become conscious that there are spiritual treasures and revelations in their religious traditions.

In the perspective of a dialogical theology, a more subjective approach to religion does not make one's religion completely relative, but rather makes it existentially meaningful. Is there a way other than one's own way? Is a person a function of formal structures, or are these structures rather a means for shaping one's identity, which is always one's own identity? The criterion for the seriousness of religious life is not one's function in some closed existing system, but the adoption of a lifestyle that fits one's spiritual aspirations. Every subject is unique, and not absorbable into uniform systems with fixed borders. Judaism knows and respects this kind of plurality, in which unity does not eliminate diversity nor the uniqueness of every Jew. Likewise, on the interreligious level every group is unique, but all belong to the broader spectrum of the human experiences of transcendence. What is needed today is not only a revisited confessional Jewish theology, but also and foremost a dialogical theology that values the uniqueness of the religious Other and promotes a religiosity based on human rights and a shared humanity. Belonging denotes belonging to one's own group as well as to humankind, and this has implications for a dialogical theology that is to be built in the future. *Jewish Theology and World Religions* is a courageous step in this direction.

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