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Between Soloveitchik, Greenberg, and Meir: The Evolution of Interfaith Thought

TANYA WHITE

A Personal Reflection

I first encountered Rabbi Yitz's work when I read his book, *The Jewish Way*. I was struck by how an introductory book to Judaism could be so philosophically profound. The way in which Rabbi Greenberg weaved deep theology and thought into the basic principles and tenants of Judaism in such a way that a layperson or even a gentile reader would be able to appreciate, astounded me. The more I read his works – in particular his post-Holocaust thought and his concept of the Voluntary Covenant – the more drawn I became to his way of thinking. Having written a Master's degree thesis on Emil Fackenheim, I was interested to see the parallel between the two thinkers, and Greenberg's visible influence on Fackenheim's rethinking of history.¹

R. Greenberg's thought is not just an elusive academic encounter for any reader. It touches the depths of one's personal religious being. In it I hear echoes of those who fell in the Shoah. I see the face of my grandfather ז"ל, who lost his entire family to Nazi brutality but was still a deeply religious man, though wrought with conflict. I recall his

1. It was with deep interest that I made this discovery. I had assumed the influence was from Fackenheim to Greenberg. Having asked Rabbi Greenberg if this was the case, I discovered the direction of influence was in fact in the reverse. Though Fackenheim never explicitly states as such, he alludes to it in his foreword of *God's Presence in History* (Fackenheim, Emil L. *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*. New York: Harper & Row, (1970).

anger on *Leil ha-Seder*² at *Vehi She'amdah*,³ how he would scream to the Almighty. "It is not true, You didn't save us, You didn't save that generation. It's a lie." As a child, I could not understand the dissonance between the man who wrapped himself in a *tallit*⁴ and prayed with fervor to the God who so enraged him. As Rabbi Greenberg exactly describes: "After Auschwitz faith means there are times when faith is overcome."⁵ Only many years later when reading Rabbi Greenberg's thought did I begin to understand the dialectical faith my grandfather must have lived with. Only with time am I beginning to comprehend that as a nation we are living in an era of the Voluntary Covenant.

Rabbi Greenberg's work is not only important for its place in Holocaust theology in that it allows us to live and believe without having to justify or validate the evil. It is important because though we may naturally despair of mankind after the Holocaust, through the voluntary covenant, Greenberg once again endows human beings with the crown of creation. We are called upon to work with our creator in perfecting an imperfect world. For me, this demand on humanity in general and the Jewish nation in particular is the essence of our being. It is a call we must adhere to, as Greenberg insists, without denouncing, denying or justifying through theodicy, the evil that we endured during our darkest period in history. Thus, ten years after first encountering R. Greenberg's work, I am beginning my doctoral studies that focus on his notion of covenant. As part of my preliminary studies, I participated in a course focused on interfaith dialogue that led me to explore at depth R. Greenberg's book *Between Heaven and Earth*.

I feel fortunate for the chance to spend the coming years studying and analyzing Rabbi Greenberg's thought, and also privileged to have met him and his wife Blu several times, and experienced the presence of his pure goodness and idealism. The prospect of bringing his thought

2. Passover *seder* night.

3. A passage from the Passover Haggadah indicating that God will save the Jewish people.

4. Jewish prayer shawl.

5. Irving Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust* Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust. Ed. Eva Fleischner. New York: Ktav, 1977, 7-55; 441-46.

to a wider audience in this *festschrift* and advancing to new levels of understanding his philosophy from which every Jew may benefit is both humbling and exciting. I feel blessed to be able to participate in this *festschrift* and thank all who made it possible.

Introduction

This essay focuses on three thinkers. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, known by many simply as “The Rav,” Professor Irving Greenberg (a student of R. Soloveitchik), and Professor Ephraim Meir of Bar Ilan University. This chapter proposes that each of these thinkers forms a particular paradigm of interreligious dialogue.

Writing in the 1960s, R. Soloveitchik penned a highly provocative and controversial work entitled *Confrontation* in which he suggests that any theological encounter with another faith should be discouraged because of the numinous nature of each faith community. This incommensurability implies that any attempt to universalize or rationalize one’s personal faith experience will reduce the totality of one’s individual truth to relative terms and thus must be avoided at all costs. In his view there is an unbridgeable gap between Judaism and Christianity. The philosophical underpinnings of this chasm are based on a model of alterity that sees the self as incommensurate with the “other.” Hence, the private existential faith experience will be beyond the grasp of another and any attempt to find commonality must result in the subjugation of one of the subjects in the encounter.

Professor Rabbi Irving Greenberg is an eminent American Jewish thinker best known for his post-Holocaust thought that expresses most profoundly the dialectical religious experience after the Holocaust. R. Greenberg has also been a great promoter of Jewish-Christian mutual understanding. Ultimately, he came to the realization that dialogue with Christianity is imperative today. His initial interest in interfaith dialogue was to purge Christian theology of its supersessionist and triumphalist claims, which lie at the heart of much of its anti-Semitic teaching. As his journey continued Greenberg became engaged in a deep dialogue with Christianity that led him to renounce all absolute truth claims. In many ways Greenberg echoes the thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel. He is committed to showing how both Christianity and Judaism are authentic

expressions of God's will,⁶ and must find common ground and a unity of differences. The Greenberg paradigm fits well into the classic category of religious pluralism that views the individual expression of faith as but one path to the absolute truth.

Greenberg interprets his revered teacher's polemic on interfaith theology as a kind of "Marrano writing,"⁷ in which the surface text conveys one meaning, but the substantive depth expresses something very different.⁸ This understanding allowed him to advance theological dialogue with what he perceived as the consent of his teacher. In doing so, he faced opposition and adversity from his Orthodox colleagues in the Rabbinical Council of America. Yet, in many ways, this opposition fired his passion even further. Greenberg's theology advanced interfaith dialogue throughout the seventies, and in particular helped expose the religious community to the importance of such advances.

Lastly, I outline in this paper the "trans-difference" paradigm of Professor Meir that both integrates and goes beyond the numinous thought of R. Soloveitchik and the pluralist paradigm of Greenberg. I attempt to show that Meir's approach allows us to reframe certain elements of R. Soloveitchik thinking on interfaith theology that could open the door to a new more conciliatory interpretation of Soloveitchik's thought on the subject.

Confrontation: An Introduction to the Controversy

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was the intellectual and *halakhic* leader of American Modern Orthodoxy. His interfaith position is characterized by his strong opposition to communal, and organizational interfaith theological dialogue. His arguments were, in part, predicated upon the

6. Heschel contends in *No Religion is an Island* that the diversity of religions is "the will of God." 14

7. Greenberg, I, *For The Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, The Jewish Publication Society Philadelphia (2004) 13.

8. This interpretation is not far from Hartman's "political" interpretation of "*Confrontation*" that sees it as a means to limit theological dialogue to those that are equipped to undertake it rather than allowing everyone to pursue it. Its pursuit should be done only by those that understand the tension of the double confrontation and not by those who acquiesce the particularity of Judaism for a more universal understanding.

fear that in search of common ground or a shared theological language, Jews and Christians might each sacrifice absolute and exclusive truth claims and by doing so negate part of their religious faith. At the heart of R. Soloveitchik's ethos on interfaith dialogue, which he set out in the 1964 article "Confrontation" published in *Tradition – A Journal of Orthodox Thought*, lies a deep antipathy towards any attempt to translate the faith experience into universal or absolute categories.

There are three important things to note about this article: (1) its rhetoric is as important as its content, (2) there is no *pesaq halakhah* at the end, which means it is more polemical and recommended policy than statutory, and (3) it may hold potential for reinterpretation with regard to future interfaith dialogue, since the Christianity that R. Soloveitchik spoke of was one that was generally adversarial to Jews and Judaism.

At face value, R. Soloveitchik rejects the religious legitimacy of the theological interfaith encounter. The reasons he offers are less important than the tone set throughout the essay, and due to ambiguity the text has lent itself to contrary interpretations. Though the classic understanding of the article is as a critique of theological dialogue, thinkers such as Irving Greenberg and Shlomo Riskin⁹ see the article as a means to permit rather than prohibit interfaith theological dialogue; hence there is much revisionist thinking of Soloveitchik. Due to the complexity of his position R. Soloveitchik's approach cannot easily be subsumed into classic categories of "pro" or "anti" interfaith theology or definitions of whether he was tolerant or pluralistic in regards to other faiths. I argue here that *Confrontation* presents a subjective phenomenology that lends itself nicely to the current trend of interfaith theology as purported by Meir – a position R. Soloveitchik could not have foreseen.

An Analysis of *Confrontation*

For R. Soloveitchik, it is the unique self-understanding of each religion that makes it distinct and unavailable one to the other. He begins *Confrontation* with the biblical account of the creation of man and utilizes

9. *Makor Rishon*, May 2012.

typological categories to create a philosophical anthropology. He outlines three stages:

(1) In the first stage, man is “happy mindedness,” unaware of the tension between himself and his environment:

This man is a “non-confronted being,” neither aware of his existential otherness nor of an external call from his creator. In modern terms he is the hedonistic pleasure-seeking individual who searches only for aesthetic satisfaction.

(2) At the second stage, man becomes “confronted,” conscious of his separation from nature and discovers his own “I”:

In this mode of existence man discovers the dichotomy of his existence and thus his tragic mode of existence begins to unfold. Happiness and serenity is replaced by perplexity, fear and loneliness. At this stage man still confronts the outside world as a subject confronts an object. He seeks to dominate through creativity and intelligence rather than hedonistic power.

(3) In the third stage, another confrontation takes place where the two subjects engage in a form of communication: the word. But the word itself is limited in its efficacy. Though we communicate, the act itself makes us even more painfully aware of our uniqueness and our inability to attain existential unity. I quote the text here in its entirety as this description will be important later when I analyze Meir’s trans-different theology:

For, in all personal unions such as marriage, friendship, or comradeship, however strong the bonds uniting two individuals, the *modi existentiae* remain totally unique and hence, incongruous, at both levels, the ontological and the experiential. The hope of finding a personal existential equation of two human beings is rooted in the dangerous and false notion that human existence are abstract magnitudes subject to the simple mathematical processes. This error lies at the root of the philosophies of the corporate state and of mechanistic behaviourism. In fact, the closer two

individuals get to know each other, the more aware they become of the metaphysical dance separating them. Each one exists in a singular manner, completely absorbed in his individual awareness which is egocentric and exclusive. The sun of existence rises with the birth of one's self-awareness and sets with its termination. It is beyond the experiential power of an individual to visualize an existence preceding or following his.¹⁰

For R. Soloveitchik, the community is born through the lonely, helpless solitude of the individual searching for redemption through the act of communication.¹¹ But as described here, the word is limited and hence any hope of finding total redemption through the encounter with the other is in vain.

At this point in the essay, R. Soloveitchik describes a “double confrontation” that faces modern, westernized Jews. He argues that these Jews see themselves engaged in a double confrontation from which any reconciliation is impossible. In reality, Jews are called upon to undertake a double mission – the universal human one and the exclusive covenantal one. The exclusive covenantal one cannot be equated with any other faith community, and is by nature totally unique:

The possibility of the double confrontation does not come through sharing our unique covenantal experience, but through the universal human mission where man sees himself as a member of a cultural-creative community.

However, the reason this double confrontation has been unsuccessful is that the defiant attitude of non-Jewish society sees Jews as objects to subordinate and dominate. It approaches Jews using the single confrontation model. For this reason, it was impossible for Jews to participate fully in the great universal creative confrontation.¹² Despite the pessi-

10. Ibid. 15.

11. This description is reminiscent of Adam II in *The Lonely Man of Faith* written soon after this essay, and perhaps forms the foundation from which his typology of Adam 1 and Adam 2 developed.

12. *Makor Rishon*, May 2012, 20.

mistic tone, there is a definite, though admittedly limited, authorization given here to dialogue with those of other faiths:

Involvement with the rest of mankind in the cosmic confrontation does not, we must repeat, rule out the second personal confrontation of two faith communities, each aware of both what it shares with the other and what is singularly its own.

Thus, he concludes that interreligious dialogue can take place at the second level but not the third.¹³

It is clear from this analysis that R. Soloveitchik does not prohibit interfaith dialogue. Rather, he sets a limit on its feasibility and productivity, in particular with regards to the theological component of any debate.

This paper argues that though R. Soloveitchik aligns interfaith dialogue with the second of his three typologies, due to historical suppositions about Christianity's relationship to Judaism, it is possible to adopt a radical and novel paradigm of interfaith dialogue that can be placed in the third category of confrontation: the encounter between subject and subject. In this encounter, which in Meir's language lies in the mode of "trans-difference," interfaith dialogue is possible for R. Soloveitchik not just on the human-ethical level but also on the theological level if we apply a different mode of reference. I maintain that by utilizing Meir's trans-difference theology, we can develop Soloveitchik's thought to incorporate a paradigm for interfaith dialogue that fits into his third level of the total ineffable faith experience. Moreover, though Soloveitchik's thought does not go far enough, it provides a starting point with which interfaith dialogue can evolve into a new radical model.

I will now outline how Greenberg interprets R. Soloveitchik's stance on interfaith dialogue. While himself undergoing an evolutionary transformation in terms of his own ideology, Greenberg presents a classic case of interfaith theology as pluralism without relativism, but does not remain true to R. Soloveitchik's phenomenological existentialism as presented in *Confrontation*. Greenberg is the midpoint between

13. Ibid. 24.

R. Soloveitchik and Meir in the evolving paradigm shift in interfaith models.

Irving Greenberg: *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*

Developing a Pluralistic Position

Greenberg is perhaps most well-known for his post-Holocaust thinking that understands the *Shoah* as a unique event demanding a unique response. His dialectical approach to Judaism is for many (myself included) the only authentic way of living with faith in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. Less discussed, but still of paramount significance, is his approach to interfaith theology. In his book *Between Heaven and Earth* he begins with an essay entitled, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity: A Personal Journey." By his own admission it is an autobiographical account of the development of his thought. In it we find the two main influences on Greenberg: the Christian theologian Ronald Niebuhr and his teacher R. Soloveitchik. Through the essays we can see why he became a controversial figure in traditional Orthodox circles. Greenberg does not shy away from stating some far reaching claims about Judaism and Christianity, which arguably tread on the claims of the particularity of each religion.

I will outline the basic tenets of his thought showing where he diverges ontologically and theologically from R. Soloveitchik, especially in regards to his existentialist leanings.

By his own admission, Greenberg is deeply influenced by the events of the twentieth century. He argues that the Holocaust created a total rupture in Jewish thinking.¹⁴ He also admits that his realization of the need to engage with his Christian counterparts arose out of,

... the absolute need to prevent a recurrence of just such behaviors. . . . It insisted that the teaching of contempt goes straight back to the original gospel accounts. The holocaust had revealed

14. Greenberg, Irving, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*. Ed. Eva Fleischer. New York: Ktav, (1977) 22–27.

that at the very heart of Christianity a shelter for evil existed that must be razed.¹⁵

Thus, Greenberg's initial motives for interfaith dialogue were internal, his thought rapidly evolved to emphasize change and the openness of each religion to the other. He admits that his engagement through dialogue with his Christian counterparts beckoned a new mode of understanding another's faith. To view the other in his intrinsic human dignity was not enough. Ultimately, one has to recognize that religion must give dignity to the character and values of other faiths:

If religions turned out to be as valid and dignified as their practitioners were, one must come up with a new conceptualization of the nature of absolute truth that would allow for the existence of two or more valid yet contradicting faiths. My response was the image of a shift from a Newtonian universe, in which there is only one absolute centre point, to an Einsteinian universe, in which many absolute centre points exist, each absolute centre point defined relative to the system in which it was embedded. It seemed important to me that the Einsteinian physics did not invalidate the Newtonian system but turned it into a limited case that existed side by side with other systems in a multifarious universe marked by plural and alternative realities.¹⁶

Greenberg's metaphor of a shift from a Newtonian universe to an Einsteinian one explains not only the shift in his own thinking on faith encounters, but also a general shift in the project of interfaith dialogue that allows for a pluralistic worldview.¹⁷ In this worldview, there exists

15. Greenberg, I, *For The Sake of Heaven and Earth*, 23.

16. *ibid.*, 10.

17. This idea is brought forth originally in Soloveitchik, *Halachic Mind*. See also Jonathan Sacks, "Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik Early Epistemology: A Review of the Halachic Mind," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Spring 1988), 75–87, where he outlines the idea of "epistemological pluralism" (79) that has emerged after Galilean-Newtonian physics was surpassed by relativity, quantum mechanics and non-Euclidian geometry, which in turn affected terms of reference in regards to philosophy.

many truths that not only exist side by side, but that can be the trigger for advancing and developing one's own particular faith. His view of the Jewish-Christian relationship is radical, particularly for an Orthodox Jew, which goes far in explaining Greenberg's controversial status within American Orthodoxy. He insists that Christianity is as much the will of God as is Judaism.¹⁸ He claims that Christianity had to grow out of Judaism and that the resurrection and incarnation were purposely ambiguous and subtle so as to allow for multiple interpretations. It should not threaten a Jew, rather both Jews and Christians should surrender their bitter fight to hold a monopoly on Divine Presence and revelation. He concludes: "The triumphalism, the rejectionism, the cruelty, and the mutual defamation all came out of the human need for reassurance that 'indeed I am the favorite child.'" ¹⁹

Greenberg's insistence on theological pluralism is emphasized time and again in his book. His view is a pluralism that retains the uniqueness of each position, but whose faith is enriched by the encounter with another faith.

Pluralism also bespeaks of God's love of variety and uniqueness. In pluralism we do not filter out the differences or turn everything gray. We encounter the full intensity of distinctive positions, witnessing in our uniqueness without distorting in our passion. By this token, pluralism is not relativism, for we hold on to our absolutes, however we make room for others as well.²⁰

By defying the relative nature of a pluralistic philosophy, Greenberg aims to preserve certain absolutes within one's own particular religion but be equally open to differing alternatives as presented in the religion of the other. His theological standing walks a narrow bridge between a pluralistic and a relative theology. It is an uneasy balance that can

18. This was expressed recently in the statement by a group of Orthodox rabbis: "To Do the Will of Our *Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*" found at www.cjcuc.com, of which R. Greenberg is a principal author. Ironically, this idea is also alluded to in Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought*. New York: Seth Press (1986).

19. Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, 195.

20. *ibid.*, 196.

quickly slip into the abyss of either relativism or absolute truth-claims at any moment. Hence, one must constantly reassess the framework of one's own individual religion in light of new encounters if one wants to retain this balance. If not, there is an inherent danger of fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism emerges when people find that old absolutes have lost their power once they are brought into the presence of the other. The fundamentalist fears (correctly) that this erosion raises the threat of the loss of all values. Therefore the fundamentalist proposes bringing back old values in the only way he or she knows i.e. in the absence of alternative voices. . . . Pluralism is made possible by the ability of a religion or a truth system to maintain its vitality and to continue to move its own adherents, even in the presence of the other. . . . The pluralist affirms absolute values but has come to know their limits. The absolute values do not cover all possibilities. Pluralism is an absolutism that has come to recognize its own limitations.²¹

Reflections on Greenberg's Thought

The advantage of this position is that not only can we co-exist peacefully with other religions but that we also make possible a radical re-reading of our own religion. In doing so religions will evolve, develop, reinterpret and engage in debate both internally and externally, something which Greenberg insists is an essential component of any religious system.

Furthermore, the dialectical tension between pluralism and particularity is reminiscent of the dialectical elements of his post-Holocaust thought. A thread runs through his theological thinking whose foundation rests on a fragile marriage of seemingly counter-values, but through which Greenberg, to his immense credit, manages to create a rich religious and human experience.

The problem in Greenberg's position is rooted in Soloveitchik's typological categories. Within Judaism, there obviously exists an accepted

21. Ibid. 202.

position of particularity that cannot necessarily be translated into the universal language of pluralism. As R. Soloveitchik emphasizes, the second level of the faith experience allows for interfaith communication based on accepted universal categories of shared humanity but the third level deals with the existential faith experience that can never be translated due to its unique individuality. For R. Soloveitchik, faith possesses an ontological facet that defies universal or objective categorization and hence resists the project of pluralism.

Greenberg and Soloveitchik: A Reinterpretation

We may ask how Greenberg, a devoted student of Soloveitchik, reconciled his pluralistic approach with the more conservative one of his teacher. The answer may be found in a conversation between him and his teacher. Greenberg recalls:

I went to see Rabbi Soloveitchik to clear away his objections for myself. First I said: “Rebbe, you taught me that in the *halakhic* worldview, life is spiritually seamless. But then there is no real distinction between the areas of social action and theology/doctrine.” After a moment’s pause, he said: “Greenberg, you are right.” (To me, the implication was that if dialogue was permitted in matters of social concern, then it was permitted in all areas.) I judged *Confrontation* to be a piece of “Marrano writing” – that is to say the surface words conveyed one message while the substantive depth expressed a very different meaning.²²

The significance of Greenberg assessment of R. Soloveitchik’s position cannot be emphasized enough. As we have noted earlier R. Soloveitchik’s stance on interfaith dialogue was presented primarily in *Confrontation*, and the plethora of interpretations makes it arguably his most contentious and enigmatic essay. Greenberg adds to the confusion by suggesting that the writing, much like that of Maimonides’ *Guide*, possesses a certain esoteric element that when understood correctly

22. Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, 13.

can lead to a different conclusion than the classical interpretation provides.²³

This esoteric interpretation opens the door for interfaith dialogue done by an elite few, who possess the tools and knowledge to engage in such an enterprise. It also, as we discussed earlier, may allow us to revise our original reading of *Confrontation* to include the potential of the double confrontation. R. Soloveitchik wrote on this immediately before a great transformation in Christian-Jewish relations,²⁴ and the project of interfaith dialogue itself has undergone a transformation. The definition of pluralism has also evolved and advanced. In light of these changes and Greenberg's claims about his teacher, can we re-interpret R. Soloveitchik's double encounter? Could we claim that the singular encounter rooted in superiority and dominance of one over the other no longer applies to Christian-Jewish relationships because in its place we now find ourselves in the double confrontation, facing the other, each in our own individual and unique faith experience? In this confrontation there is no desire for assimilation or supersession, rather an authentic and genuine wish to simply "meet" the other in all of his/her distinctiveness, on both a human-ethical level and on a theological level.

The "conflict" inherent in the double confrontation that R. Soloveitchik describes as a choice for the western Jew between being "confronted human beings or confronted Jews" contains according to the thinker an inner contradiction. Yet, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Perhaps today the westernized Jew can live in a dialectical tension between these two positions. Is it possible that instead of having to understand the other through universal, objective ontological

23. It is interesting to note that in another essay ("*Shtei Dlatot Patach HaRav Soloveitchik – v'lo Avar Bahem: al Atidah Shel HaOrthodoxiah Ha Modernit.*") RAV BA'OLAM HACHADASH: Iyunim B'Hashpa'ato Shel HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik al Tarbut, al Chinuch v'al Machshavah Yehudit. Ed. Avinoam Rosenak and Naftali Rotenberg. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, (2010) 245–277). Greenberg makes a similar claim concerning the Rav in terms of his pluralistic leanings. He reads the Rav's writings as a lesson in pluralist theology.

24. In 1965, the Vatican II under the leadership of Paul VI produced the landmark document *Nostra Aetate* that repudiated in part the Jewish role in the death of Christ. It represented a new starting point in the relations between the Church and Judaism.

categories, we can remain fixed in our “singular normative gesture”²⁵ and still engage in a confrontation with the other? If we answer in the affirmative, can R. Soloveitchik’s double confrontation be reinterpreted to contain a profound possibility for interfaith dialogue that reaches beyond even the claims of his students such as Greenberg and David Hartman?

The answer to this question finds its expression in the work of Ephraim Meir, who argues that interfaith dialogue must move beyond classic pluralism as portrayed by Greenberg to a new dimension where we address the other, not through mutual categories of understanding but through our “trans-difference.” By outlining Meir’s work, I will show that his approach moves us beyond the classic terms of pluralism and interfaith dialogue to a new dimension based on a dialogical rather than a theological interpretation of the faith encounter. This new approach marks a distinctive evolution in the interfaith project that can shed new and radical light on previously understood concepts of faith, dialogue and encounter.

Ephraim Meir: “Trans-Difference”

Reflections on the Self

In recent years, Ephraim Meir developed a new paradigm for relating to interfaith theology. His work is based on a novel approach to selfhood, as stated in the introduction to his book,²⁶ that despite our difference to the other and also to self, there is a real possibility and even imperative for interfaith dialogue. His book enlists the philosophy of dialogical philosophers such as Rosensweig, Levinas, and Buber to build a new philosophy of identity and alterity. His theory traces an evolving “I” that moves from self-transcendence to self-difference and finally trans-difference. Through these categories he frames his theory of interfaith theology. Meir rejects Heidegger’s model of the isolated “I,” as conveyed in the thought of R. Soloveitchik, arguing instead that though “each person is unique and irreplaceable in his

25. Soloveitchik, *Confrontation*.

26. Ephraim Meir, *Dialogical Thought and Identity: Trans-different Religiosity in Present Day Societies*, De Gruyter Mages (2013).

inescapable interconnection with the ‘non-I’”, there is still a possibility for trans-difference or relation with the other. Meir views the self in two ways: “primarily as a self that extends to the other, at the same time retaining an element of individuality, of difference from the other.” Thus, he concludes, “Between the self and the other, trans-difference is possible.”²⁷

Meir warns against the conclusion presented by R. Soloveitchik in *Confrontation*. He contends, justifiably, that it leads to a regressive attitude towards the other that “avoids communication and remains nomadic, within the own, without windows and without empathy and solidarity with others, remains real.”²⁸ In such conditions, the other is seen as a threat and hence the potential for indifference and even violence exists. Similarly, Greenberg’s pluralism does not grant enough significance to the genuine uniqueness and numinous nature of the “I.” In Meir’s paradigm, the other comes neither to threaten the “I” nor to be integrated into part of his *Weltanschauung*. Instead, the encounter between the two individuals leads to a new understanding of self. Meir contends, “that alterity or permanent changeability in favor of the other makes up the very identity of the always changeable I.”²⁹

It is here that the significance of the difference between their positions unfolds. R. Soloveitchik offers the direction. Meir actually enters the space that R. Soloveitchik suggests, a space opened up through dialogue and propelled by Levinas’ insight that the “I” is constituted by the other. Thus, the incommensurable divide is bridged by the awareness that:

... the absolute limit posed by the awareness of incommensurability is in fact also a mirror ... a mirror whose surface is composed by one’s projection of the other’s conception of me. But this other is not simply a solipsistic construction, for it is formed from actual engagement with an other.³⁰

27. Ephraim Meir, *Dialogical Thought and Identity: Trans-different Religiosity in Present Day Societies*, De Gruyter Magnes (2013), 2.

28. *ibid.*, 160.

29. *ibid.*

30. One can always attack this position with the foil of Kant’s (or Heidegger’s) isolated ego. To this one can retort that if one cannot define the qualitative difference

Interfaith Dialogue through Trans-Difference Methodology

For Meir dialogue with the other is not of secondary consideration to the needs of “I.” It comprises, rather, a necessity forming an integral element of the “I” identity. While both R. Soloveitchik and Greenberg view dialogue with the other as utilitarian, encompassing a secondary stage in the development of the self, for Meir it is of primary importance. As was discussed earlier, the self, especially the religious self, cannot be defined without the dialogical relationship. As a corollary, interfaith dialogue is not a project that is based on the need for reconciliation or social adhesion, but rather on the needs of the self in his search for both individual and collective identity. Hence the other is seen as integral to the self, but equally ineffable and immeasurable, immune to objectification and definition.

For R. Soloveitchik, the numinous “I” experience that may be redeemed through a confrontation with the other cannot be done from a religious perspective, for there is no way to ‘translate’ the covenantal confrontation. Hence, our encounter with the other faith will always remain at the second level of confrontation in the universal normative framework.

However, if we use Meir’s analysis of the religious self, there is a way for men of faith to engage with each other without necessarily having to understand or define the faith experience. Meir states:

In “self-difference,” one refuses to reduce the other to himself and to exercise power over the other: the self in “self-difference” keeps a distance between itself and the other and the respect and awe for this distance creates the non-indifferent relationship. The difference of the other and the difference of the self do not lead to the impossibility of an encounter; on the contrary, the undeniable differences makes a “trans-different” encounter possible.³¹

between no dialogue and a dialogue based on respect, care, and desire to understand the other (i.e., love), then the accusation of solipsism lacks substance.

31. Ephraim Meir: *Dialogical Thought and Identity: Trans-different Religiosity in Present Day Societies*, De Gruyter Magnes (2013) 150.

By using this new paradigm of trans-difference there is a way to reassess R. Soloveitchik's conclusion. In the paradigm of self-difference there is a refusal to reduce the other to himself, or to acquiesce to the danger of syncretism.³²

Conclusion

Soloveitchik's *Confrontation* sees interfaith theology as highly problematic due to the impossibility of moving beyond individual ontological loneliness. He perceives the "I" as a self-composed parochial unit. The "other" comes to threaten the "I," objectifying and defining him on his own terms. The other is seen as an object to be integrated and assimilated into the self. Any encounter with the other will entail a "translation" of my inner world which while possible on some level, for R. Soloveitchik is limited in its scope and hence can only be played out at the universal level of mankind and not at the covenantal level of faith.

Greenberg's interfaith theology is based on a limited view of the individual's particularity. It recognizes both the boundaries of one's own faith, since only God is absolute and infinite, and equally retains one's own integrity and truth. Knowledge of the other religion is merely another path to discovering the multi-faceted manifestation of God. Though his theory resembles classic pluralistic theology, unlike some pluralists, he does not reduce alterity to sameness and this is its strength and significance. His interfaith theology can be seen as an evolving conception of the encounter from an *I-It* to an *I-Thou* relationship.

Though he does not write about interfaith dialogue from the strictly metaphysical perspective, it is clear Greenberg rejects in many ways R. Soloveitchik's numinous ontology in favor of pluralism that recognizes the importance of the other in shaping the self.

Meir's interfaith theology must be seen through new categories of

32. In his paper "A Reassessment of Rav Soloveitchik Essay on Interfaith Dialogue: 'Confrontation'" (Columbus School of Law, Catholic University of America Volume 1 (2005–2006): 151–16), Marshall J. Berger claims that one of the things Soloveitchik feared about interfaith dialogue was potential for the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing religious principles, or practices, by incorporating elements of one religion into another. Using the trans-difference method this fear would be immediately allayed.

definition: self-transcendence, self-difference, trans-difference. It rejects the Heideggerian approach of R. Soloveitchik that sees the self as an all encompassed unique being inaccessible to the other, instead favoring an ontology shaped by the “other” in his/her differences.

Through the other, the self becomes aware of its own difference leading to self-transcendence and hence reshaping one’s own identity. In many ways Greenberg and Meir have much in common: Their interfaith theology rests on a subjectivity not confined to a parochial existentialism, but is a phenomenology whose encounter with the object moves beyond a limited definition of self into a continual re-definition of self. Writing more than two decades later,³³ however, Meir goes further than Greenberg. While for Greenberg self-renewal and redefinition may come as a result of an encounter with another faith, it is not an imperative for self-identity. For Meir the self cannot be defined without the other, i.e. the encounter with the other is a prerequisite for self-definition. Accordingly, for R. Soloveitchik it is impossible for the religious man to engage in a true interfaith dialogue, for Greenberg it is possible and preferable and for Meir it is a necessity.

This chapter claimed that Soloveitchik’s *Confrontation*, containing many polemical elements particular to the period in which it was penned, may be reframed. Mindful of the fact that relations between Christianity and Judaism have changed significantly since 1964, and based only on the philosophical component of the essay, I have argued that by viewing the self through Meir’s trans-difference theology, a genuine encounter with another at R. Soloveitchik’s third level is possible. For both Meir and Soloveitchik, the other is numinous and unknown. But for Meir the alterity of the other does not lead to rejection but rather to an encounter with self and other at a new dimension. R. Soloveitchik describes an encounter between two individuals at the third level as:

... two equal subjects, both lonely in their otherness and uniqueness, both opposed and rejected by an objective order, both

33. Many essays in Greenberg’s book span over two or three decades. Hence, much of his inter-faith theology was written in the seventies and eighties.

craving for companionship. This confrontation is reciprocal, not unilateral.³⁴

For R. Soloveitchik, this is the end point of any genuine dialogue because the individual faith experience makes it impossible. For Meir, this is the starting point from which self-difference and trans-difference develop. Thus, there is a possibility that within R. Soloveitchik's thought lies a precarious foundation for interfaith dialogue, not in the classic pluralist model, but in the model of trans-difference.

34. *Confrontation*, 9.