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the quest  
for world community  
based on the resources of other groups

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1. The effort to achieve world community, as a voluntary pluralistic entity rather than as an imposed uniformity, raises a particularly sensitive question — one amongst many — to which each participant in the endeavour must essay his own answer. That question is: How can we understand and work together with communities of other religions and ideologies in their quest for a world community based on their own resources? This paper is an effort to formulate a Jewish response to this challenge.

2. It is a truism that Judaism has often interacted with contemporary civilizations, and cultural borrowing is a fact of history which requires no documentation. Yet with Judaism, such borrowing as did occur was largely unconscious. Deliberate imitation was explicitly proscribed. "Neither shall ye walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3) was taken as a general prohibition of pagan practices and became a major source of Judaism's strictures against non-Jewish ritual and mores. To speak, therefore, of cooperation with other faith communities on the basis of their own resources, poses an immediate dilemma.

3. There is an inherent danger in the whole enterprise that we have labelled "the quest for world community." It may, if we are not on our guard, result in committing one of three fundamental errors.

The first of these is the possibility that "world community" will become a euphemism for what can only be called religious and ideological imperialism, whether conscious or unconscious. If our goals are largely identical, why not adopt my methods?



The second is the imposition of a kind of apologetic straitjacket on individual philosophies, frequently distorting them in the course of striving for preconceived conclusions acceptable to others. Jewish thought has too often suffered from this wilful if well-intentioned distortion.

Third, one must beware of falling into the trap of a theological indifferentism which regards theological and cultic exclusiveness as retrograde and reactionary. If, according to this doctrine, all that counts is the ultimate desideratum — whether that be a moral principle or ethical conduct or belief in a supernatural god or religious experience — and all the various methods of reaching that goal are of little impact, then our problem is no problem; but then too, our Judaism is no Judaism, and we have no right to speak in its name.

4. However, the biblical prohibition against cultic promiscuity, especially as it was expanded by the Rabbis, cannot and need not be taken as an assertion of the total self-containment of Jewish teaching and a denial of validity to any and all non-Jewish wisdom. That there have been such introversionist, centripetal, and exclusivist tendencies in the history of Jewish religious thought and life cannot be denied; but the tradition speaks with other voices as well.

One finds, in general, a more open attitude in the earlier sources of the Rabbinic tradition than in the later ones. We may accept as normative, I believe, the Midrashic dictum: "If someone tells you that the nations of the world possess wisdom, you may believe him; that they possess Torah (read: religious truth), do not believe him" (Lam. R. 2:13).

One can cite a whole roster of examples from the medieval Sephardic authorities to illustrate the receptivity of Judaism to the insights of others when such insights are not in conflict with basic Jewish thought. Maimonides, whose name is the first to come to mind in this respect, explicitly taught, "accept the truth, no matter what its source" (introduction to his "Eight Chapters"). And Don Isaac Abravanel, somewhat later, was not averse to quoting Christian exegetes and sometimes preferring their interpretations of Scripture over those of the Jewish commentaries.

5. One must, of course, make a clear distinction between cultic practices and intellectual insights. Whatever else the terms *hokhmah*

(wisdom) and *Torah* may mean (in the Midrashic passage cited above), they do differentiate between the realm of particularistic cult and universal knowledge. Jewish ritual practice is "private," normative, and specific, and hence should be guarded against infusion of non-Jewish religious forms. But cult and culture are by no means identical. Human culture and civilization have broad universal aspects in which all human beings share by virtue of their very humanity; hence, the Noahide laws as the common heritage of all mankind. The Sages of the Talmud were not averse to holding up certain contemporary pagan nations as exemplars of particular moral behaviour which they considered worthy of imitation (see BT, *Ber.* 8b).

6. Judaism imposes on its members a normative code of conduct, yet it cannot be considered monolithic in its insights and values. It exhibits paradoxes, and, often, opposing principles. The Halakhah itself, the very expression of Judaism's quest for essential uniformity in moral and ritual behaviour, is often arrived at as a result of the clash of and interplay between conflicting rules, principles, and values. One may thus find elements in Judaism which articulate well with insights of other faiths or secular ideologies. To cite but one example, Judaism knows of both quietistic and activist streams in its tradition. It may find resonance for its quietistic dimensions in certain eastern religions, and its activism certainly corresponds to that of modern, secular technological culture. The presence of such polarities and ambivalences within the Jewish tradition allows us, as committed Jews, to work cooperatively towards world community with others who espouse any one side of such views and are seized of one aspect of such polarities, without our necessarily adopting the whole context of these insights or subscribing even to that one particular view for ourselves.

7. One further caveat is in order in formulating a Jewish response to this challenge of working towards world community with others on the basis of their own particular resources. The attempt to assign to other religions an anticipatory messianic role in the redemptive conception of history (e.g. Jewish versions of the concept of *preparatio evangelica*) should not serve as a legitimation of our goals. Judaism can no more use Christianity than Christianity can use Judaism by virtue of this argument. Furthermore, this argument is confined to



one or two historical religions – Christianity and Islam – and says nothing about all others, especially non-western religions.

8. In view of what has been said thus far, we must now formulate the *modus operandi* for such a cooperative quest for world community, and here two points need to be made.

First, a guiding principle should be that while every religion and ideology draws upon its own indigenous resources in order to formulate its insights, attitudes, and doctrines on world community; and while these resources should be respected and peculiar modes of hermeneutics and exegesis accepted as valid for that group; the other religions and ideologies joining in the quest for world community should consider only the conclusions, and not the resources and methods, in devising means for working cooperatively towards world community.

An example of the above may be cited from resources of Judaism. A law or a generally sanctioned approach to non-Jews may be a basic *halakhah* with pronounced universalistic and humanistic emphasis, or it may turn out to be of sufficiently broad scope only as a result of certain correctives that the halakhic method supplies, such as the principle of *kiddush hashem* or *darkei shalom*. How we arrive at such conclusions is irrelevant to other groups; *which* resources we use is only of academic interest to them. Of real and effective significance are only the specific *conclusions* at which we arrive.

9. The second point is far more difficult to attain, because it obligates all participants to a form of collective self-restraint. Many religions, especially western religions and certain ideologies possess, to varying degrees, dreams of universal acceptance, whether by force or by conviction. The utopian views of Christianity and Islam have traditionally envisioned the ideal state of mankind as the embracing by all humans of their respective prophets or dogma. Judaism, at the very least, looks forward to the obliteration of idolatry, and the universal acceptance of the One God. Marxism strives for domination by the proletariat and the establishment of a classless society based on its dialectical materialism. If such ultimate aims are denied, we are false to these individual outlooks.

How, then, can Christianity achieve genuine world community with Jews, when it desires all Jews eventually to accept Jesus? How shall

Moslems work with Christians when the goal of Islam is the universal acknowledgment of Mohammed? How shall Jews cooperate in world community with religions which they traditionally consider idolatrous? And how shall the materialistic Marxist achieve genuine cooperation with any of the above, when he sees them as obstacles to the realization of his utopian vision?

It is here, perhaps, that all religions and ideologies may have to be called upon to make a clear decision, in common, in order to proceed both honestly and honourably on the quest for world community. That is, that having openly acknowledged its eschatological goals, each group must affirm that our contemporary mutual quest for world community is non-eschatological or, at worse, pre-eschatological. Allied with this must come a resolve that even if world community represents, according to one's insights and orientation, a pre-eschatological state, such world community must never become the instrumentality for activist eschatological realization, and the proselytization that it implies.

That is admittedly asking a great deal from those communities for whom the achievement of the *eschaton* is an essential doctrine and effective motivation of conduct. But unless such self-restraint is forthcoming, and unless it is forthcoming in a manner that will inspire trust by others, the quest for world community will be bedevilled by mutual suspicion and will die while being born.