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Rabbi's mysticism teaches universal empathy

Thomas C. Fox | May. 9, 2010

Rabbi Arthur Green

Rome

Evoking the ?good memories? of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, a Jewish Rabbi added his voice here May 8 to those exploring mysticism in the modern world as he addressed some 800 international religious women.

Speaking to a gathering of the International Union of Superiors General as its plenary gathering, he examine the problem of being identified with a particular group or religious tradition and at the same time holding universal empathy.

Rabbi Athur Green described himself as a neo-Hasidic Jew, placing himself within a tradition that holds ?that God can be found in each place and in every moment,? adding that the purpose of prayer, and ritual, ?is to help us open our hearts to that presence.?

Neo-Hasidism, he said, differs from classical Hasidism in that neo-Hasidics do not share the Hasidic disdain for modernity, especially for modern education and science. ?We accept the legitimacy of scientific and historical investigation and believe that faith must be updated in response to it.?

Green said that in monotheism one realizes that ?all being, including every creature ? and that means the rock and the blade of grass in your garden as well as your pet lizard and your human neighbor next door ? are all one in origin.

You come from the same place. You were created in the same great act of love. God takes delight in each form that emerges and bestows God?s own grace upon it. Therefore ? and this is the ?payoff? line, the only one that really counts: Treat them that way! They are all God?s creatures; they exist only because of the divine presence, the same divine presence that makes you exist.?

God and existence, he went on, are not separable from one another. ?God is not some Fellow over there who created a separate, distinct entity called ?world? over here. There are not two; there is only one.?

Green called himself a strong proponent of creation theology. He said he says the hand of God in creation as it unfolds through time.

?To see ?God? when you look at existence is a re-arranging of the molecules, as it were. Seeing the BIG picture instead of the many smaller ones. God is Being when you see Being as one, when you see the whole picture. Of course we can?t ever really see all of that big picture. The sum is infinitely more than the totality of its parts. Transcendent mystery remains, even in my very immanentist theology. But for me transcendence resides within immanence. Transcendence does not refer to a God who dwells ?out there? somewhere, on the far side of the universe (which has no sides, the astronomers assure us!). Transcendence means that God is here, present in this very moment, in a way so intense and profound that we could never fathom it. That is the mystery.?

Green said that ?ultimately, we are all of the One, embodiments of the same divine presence. Behind the mask of the other lies the oneness of the Maker reflected in the deed. Empathy means both embracing each of us in our diversity and seeing through to our oneness.?

He said Christians approach this concept of oneness in the tradition of Corpus Christi.

?But some confusion arises around these concepts. Does the language of Corpus Christi include only those inside the church??

He added that Jews have a different version of the same problem. ?We remain a distinct people, an ethnic entity, as well as a community of faith. We insist that we can be both at once. But then how exclusive are we? Our prayers are filled with appeals to God to bless us ?and the whole people Israel.? Do we pray only for ourselves? What about the rest of humanity? Do we pray for them as well?

Holding universal empathy, he said, ?is the great struggle within Judaism today.?

?How wide is our circle of empathy, of compassion? Can we open the doors of our hearts widely enough to include the whole human family, even the larger family of natural beings, within it, without losing our distinctive sense of history and ethnic identity? Can the special love I have for members of my own community be a love that encourages me to open further, to embrace ever wider circles in love? Or does it necessarily close me off from others, creating a circle of exclusiveness, to which most of humanity remains outside??

Both Christians and Jews need to struggle with what he called a ?legacy of exclusivism.? ?You may blame ancient Israel and its prophets for having started it, but the church inherited it and raised the stakes, until we Jews too were seen as outsiders.?

?But it is too late now for all this. The world has become too small. We all live side by side with one another, and the need is too urgent. We need to work side by side in facing the great challenges before us. These include the degradation of the human spirit in our profane modern culture, the endless lure of selfish materialism and the great injustices it engenders, and the very preservation of our planet itself as a home for higher forms of life. All these are the real work of religious people and communities, and we must be united to facing them.?

To do this, we need to go back to ?Y-H-W-H is one? and the demand for universal love that it implies. This represents the teaching of both of our traditions at its best.

?For us Jews, the struggle over exclusivism touches another matter that lies close to our hearts. I speak to you in the decade when the last survivors of our terrible Holocaust are about to end their time here on earth, the moment when their tortured memory of suffering will turn into 'mere' history. We struggle daily with the question of the Holocaust?s legacy, the murder of one third of our people and the destruction of so many

cultural and spiritual resources. What are we to learn from that terrible event? We do not believe that God visited it upon us; we believe it was the doing of human evil. But still, we must learn from it, we must seek God?s message, there as everywhere.

"Many Jews feel that the message is clear. 'Never again!' means that Jewish blood is not cheap. We will defend ourselves, take pre-emptory action against our enemies, and never allow Jews to be victims. But the best among the survivors, including both Heschel and, may he be blessed with long life, Elie Wiesel, have understood 'Never again!' to mean that never again will we permit genocide anywhere in our single human family, that we, as genocide?s survivors, will stand up for all who suffer. History has not made it easy for us to do that, as you know. But we were never promised that it would be easy.

?Your church made great strides in openness of spirit, partly in response to that same terrible event. The spirit of Vatican II, and especially the words of Nostra Aetate, gave us all much hope that the truest catholicity or universality of your faith was being given full expression. Many of us, including myself, learned from and were inspired by your church?s ability to repent, to grow, and to change, while remaining faithful to your own identity. I urge you with my whole heart to continue in the path of that growth, not to compromise it in your hearts or in your teaching. I promise you that I, along with a host of my colleagues and students, present and future rabbis, struggle alongside you to read our own tradition as one of universal human embrace.?

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