

A Jewish Perspective

TO LEARN AND TO TEACH:  
*Some Thoughts on Jewish-Buddhist Dialogue*

ARTHUR GREEN

IT WAS CIRCA 1970 that I received a call from Fordham University's Center for Spiritual Studies asking me to participate in a day-long seminar of spiritual teachings from several traditions. The theme of the day (it was a bright spring day, in fact, as I recall it) was to be "The Seasons of the Year in the Spiritual Traditions," and there were to be speakers from the Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. I shared the platform with Brother David Steindl-Rast, a well-known Benedictine monk and author; Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga; and the head of the New York Zen Center, whose name (perhaps tellingly) was and is unknown to me.

Brother David spoke very beautifully about the journey from Christmas to Easter, the passage from birth to death to resurrection, taking them all as metaphors to describe stages in the spiritual life. I did something similar, speaking of the fall and spring festival cycles as holy periods of rebirth for the individual and the people. I talked in highly personal terms about coming out of Egypt and the journey to Sinai. My feeling was that I too had done pretty well.

When the swami's turn came, he chatted smilingly and lovingly with the audience for a few minutes, and then asked us to join him in chanting. Judging by the look on his face and those of his disciples (who were quite numerous in the audience), he offered us a quarter-hour taste of pure bliss. Then came the turn of the Zen teacher. He got up and said, "I have fifteen minutes; we will sit." And he then proceeded to do so, again providing a

very direct and unmediated experience in which all could take part.

After the event was over, I chatted with Brother David. "Why," I asked him, "do we Westerners keep our spiritual treasures so hidden?" How is it that one could have a dozen years of Jewish or Christian education and never be exposed to the simple things we were saying? Even after they were said, how great was the distance between the telling and the experience itself? Why could we not learn from these Eastern teachers, just opening our hearts to share our religious lives with people in a direct and unmediated way, without insisting on so many prior layers of learning, faith commitment, and ritual observance?"

"You Jews think you've got it bad?" he answered. "Look at us Catholics—we even insist on commitment to a life of *celibacy* before we'll open the box and share our greatest treasures!"

A great deal has changed in the third of a century since that encounter. My teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel used to complain in those days that we totally lacked a Jewish *devotional literature* in English, books the seeker could read for inspiration and encouragement along the path. Now there are hundreds of such books on the market, both translations of classical sources and new compositions written specifically for this generation. Some of them are even quite good. Kabbalah, once the secret wisdom of Judaism, is being taught everywhere, even to non-Jews, let alone to Jews with no prior knowledge of, or commitment to, the exoteric aspects of tradition. "Jewish meditation," once the province of a most arcane corner within Kabbalistic and Hasidic circles, is now being taught at Ys and centers all over the country. More books on "Jewish meditation" have been written in the past twenty years than in the preceding thousand.

Mostly, I believe, this is "good for the Jews." (Yes, I cringe plenty at seeing some of the more superstitious elements of "practical Kabbalah" marketed to the innocent New Age audience. I understand they are selling "holy water" blessed by the rabbi, at a center not far from here, and I am duly horrified.) There is indeed a rich and wonderful spiritual language to be found within Kabbalah. If it can be distilled and remixed to

work for the current age—and I too am trying my hand at that—both the practitioners and the Jewish people as a whole stand to gain. Loyalty to Judaism in our day, a time of living in a truly open society, will have to be based on love and attraction to Judaism rather than on guilt or fear. And this love will come about because the language of Judaism *works* for us, because it stirs our emotions, satisfies our minds, and lifts our spirits. The teachings of Jewish mysticism, especially those of the Hasidic masters, were designed to fill just that role in the spiritual revival movement of an earlier generation. It is time to look to them, both as a source of learning and as a model for our own creativity, in an hour when spiritual revival is once again central to our agenda.

But there is great difference. All the past sources of Jewish mystical teaching belong to an exclusivist time and tradition. They were written under the rule of religious interaction as a *zero-sum game*. If my religion is true, yours must be false. If the teachings of Judaism are profound, those of the other faiths—usually Christianity and Islam, the traditional "rival" religions—must be more shallow, distorted, or downright untrue. The notion of a universal religious truth that transcended the boundaries of tradition was not generally accepted within Jewry, and surely not by the mystics.

Of course this Jewish denigration of other religions has to be understood in historical context. Jews lived for nearly two thousand years as barely tolerated minorities in societies and states that defined themselves as either Christian or Islamic. There were great variations in the degrees of persecution from one place or time to another, to be sure. But "tolerance" was the best Jews could hope for from the general society, and religious teaching always depicted Judaism as a somehow inferior or incomplete religion. The hope of teachers and leaders in the two would-be "successor" traditions to Judaism often led to active campaigns aimed at conversion. These had more success in various periods than is generally known or admitted. The historical powerlessness and exilic condition of the Jews was marshalled as "evidence" of their religious error. How could one imagine that God would abandon His chosen people

and leave them to such a lowly status, unless they had gone wrong in some deep and essential way? To counter this Christian and Islamic supersessionism, Jews increasingly asserted their exclusive claim to truth, cried out their wounded hearts to God, and longed for the redemption that would prove their vindication.

But the claims of exclusiveness on all sides masked the true situation. Both Islam and Christianity were deeply indebted to Judaism. Each in its own way was based on ancient Jewish teaching, including but not limited to the Hebrew Bible text itself. The Jews also adopted many practices and ways of thinking from the surrounding cultures. There were ways, quite naturally, in which eastern European Judaism was typically eastern European in its folk beliefs, veneration of holy men, casual intimacy of prayer as "conversation" with God, and so forth. The same could be said of North African or other Jewish communities. "As the Christians are, so are the Jews" is a Yiddish folk saying that goes back to medieval Germany, reflecting a certain degree of truth.

There have also been sources of knowledge and understanding that come from outside the three monotheistic faiths and that have shaped and influenced all of them. The greatest example is medieval philosophy. The teachings of Aristotle were well known in the Middle Ages. Those of Plato were thought to be known also, but these were actually neo-Platonic writings of the fourth to sixth centuries. Both of these bodies of teaching, coming from outside the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, were taken to be sources of truth by such great authorities within the traditions as al-Farabi, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas. They in fact provided the basis for the best-known theologies of all three traditions for many centuries. In more recent times, both Jewish and Christian theologies (Islam had by then turned away from the modernizing West) were composed based on the teachings of Immanuel Kant and G. F. W. Hegel, the leading figures of continental philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

During the past fifty years, due to a process that can be subsumed under the category of "globalization," Jews and Judaism are for the first

time coming into significant encounter with the religious teachings of the Far East, especially those of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, in all their many and varied manifestations. These contacts are different from those with Christianity and Islam in two important ways. First, there is no reason for defensiveness or hostility. These are not traditions in whose name Judaism was ever suppressed or persecuted. Nor are these traditions that ever claimed to supersede Judaism or asserted that its time was past. The Jewish-Buddhist and Jewish-Hindu dialogue may take place in an atmosphere that is free of the long-standing resentments and the struggle to overcome ancient feelings of competitiveness that mar Jews' dialogue with Western religious partners.

But these are also religions that are not based on the Judaic model. When engaging in dialogue with Christian and Islamic partners, we can assume a shared legacy of the ancient struggle against polytheism and the rejection of what our shared traditions called "idolatry." The Hindu and Buddhist ways of dealing with such sensitive questions for Judaism as monism/monotheism/polytheism and abstract faith/graven images make the contact with them problematic in an entirely new set of ways.

Large numbers of Jews, along with a great many other Western seekers, have been drawn to various forms of Eastern religious teaching over the course of the past half-century. These people are in no way to be blamed or condemned for having "abandoned" their Judaism. If there is any fault to be found in the failure of honest seekers to find their way within Judaism, it may lie more with us, the rabbis, Jewish teachers, and educators. We did not speak the right spiritual language. We were unable, despite both knowledge and goodwill, to "open up" pathways within Judaism for these many seekers. Ours is a highly intellectualized tradition, one in which it has long been assumed that the sincere seeker will have a knowledge of language, texts, and practices. Lacking these, and often frustrated at feeling like an "outsider" to their own heritage, it is no surprise that so many Jews have turned elsewhere.

Of course we long to welcome these seekers home and pray for their return to the Jewish spiritual fold. We do so not because Judaism has the

only truth, or because ours is the best or only way to seek God. We long for their return because we love them and need them. The souls of Israel are viewed from within our tradition as one single great soul. All of us stood together at the mountain; all of us were there in the soul of Moses as he entered the heavens. To see so many Jews alienated from our Torah is to lose a part of ourselves, to know that we are less than whole. Our loss is more painful because we see that these are not Jews deaf to the call of the spirit. There are too few such Jews within our little community, always called "the smallest of all the nations." These Jewish seekers are our fellow heirs to a great legacy. We are generous inheritors, and would be happy to share it with them, to have them join with us and enrich us with what they have learned along the way. Some indeed have returned to Judaism by way of a journey through the East, and our shared Jewish life is richer for their presence.

*Life in this open society calls for a new sort of interfaith dialogue, one that takes for granted a mutual respect and admiration. This has to be characterized by a true sense that God's single, unifying presence is to be found in each human soul, in all of humanity's languages and cultures, and in the forms of every religion. We celebrate difference, to be sure, and are not looking to obliterate distinctions or to combine all religions. Missionary efforts should be completely rejected in the context of this new dialogue, as should a shallow syncretism that does not respect diversity or the need to preserve distinct identities. But the preservation of one faith's distinctiveness should never demand the price of denigration of others. In that spirit, the traditional religious genre called "apologetics" needs to be challenged and redefined, since such works usually set out to prove the superiority of one faith-path above all others.*

The purpose of dialogue in this post-triumphalist context is mutual edification. We wish *to learn* and *to teach*, to gain wisdom from others that will (sometimes through challenge) deepen our own quest. We also want to share with others what we think is wise and universally applicable from within the storehouse of our own traditional wisdom. We recog-

nize that there are great tasks that face us all as fellow inhabitants of this planet, tasks that will require cooperation across lines of tradition if they are to be accomplished. None among these is more urgent than the changing of human attitudes toward the natural world in which we live and of which we are a part. All religions need to pool their wisdom to create a profound change in human behavior with regard to our planet and the use of its resources.

But let us go back to learning and teaching. What is it that Judaism needs to learn in such a dialogue among religious teachings? And what do we believe we have to offer that might be of use to others, even those whose language remains far from our own? The approach to this pair of questions requires a balance of humility and self-respect. We need to acknowledge that we are all somewhere along the path, that none of us has the entire truth. In this sense we can all stand to learn from others. Each of our journeys is likely to be helped by the support and encouragement we receive from one another. At the same time, we should each realize that certain distinct values and teachings are brought forth so clearly in our own traditions that these might be of help to others as well. We should be willing to teach these in the course of dialogue, but without needing or demanding of others that they share our commitment to them.

In this spirit, I want to share two thoughts on each side of the ledger. These are not exhaustive, but will provide a model of my best hopes for the great potential of Jewish dialogue with Eastern religions.

In the context of Jewish-Buddhist and Jewish-Vedanta dialogue, we could profit much from discussion around the theme of monotheism and monism. Judaism's biblical legacy is one of struggle against polytheism. The deities of the Near Eastern pantheon, first "defeated" by the greater power of the God of Israel, are depicted by the later Biblical authors as non-gods, mere "sticks and stones." The powers formerly attributed to these gods are now all included within the One. The most telling expression of this change is the Hebrew term for "God" itself: *elohim* is a plural form, a collective entity that contains all of the divine powers.

Like all great cultural struggles, the ending of this one was not entirely clear or simple. The Bible, and later Judaism with it, inherited a great deal from the very milieu against which it struggled. The residence of God in the "heavens," the metaphoric trappings of royalty, and the image of God as cosmic judge are all derived from Babylonian and Canaanite myth. The need to see God as an all-powerful divine Person may itself be rooted in this ancient legacy of battle against the heathen.

For more than a thousand years, Jewish theologians have lived in tension with this biblical legacy. The medieval rationalists (with some earlier precedent) first fought against anthropomorphism, insisting that biblical descriptions of God in human terms, whether physical or emotional, were not to be taken literally. Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) represents the high point of this long process. Next came the Kabbalists, who opened up the floodgates of imagination to infinitely varied images of God. Biblical descriptions took their place within a dazzling array of nature imagery, daringly erotic discussions of love within the godhead, and awareness of God as a mystery that was at once revealed and hidden within both world and Torah. Here it was the *variety* of images and their rapid flow into one another that were to keep one from idolatrous over-attachment to a single way of depicting God.

Kabbalah, as a form of mysticism, also included some monistic or pantheistic tendencies, reaching toward a notion of God as universal soul, present throughout the world and manifest in all creatures. This direction was followed further by some of the early Hasidic masters, who read Judaism in highly panentheistic ("all is God, but God is infinitely more than the sum of all that is") or acosmic ("there is *only* God; all else is illusion") terms. Nevertheless, these same masters were unwavering advocates of traditional Jewish folk piety, including its most blatantly anthropomorphic expressions. For such teachers there was no contradiction between addressing God in Yiddish as *tateh in himl* ("daddy" in heaven) and describing "Him" as the cosmic Nothing that underlies all forms of being.

How are we to understand this process? Are we in the course of a long, slow evolution from theism to monism, parallel to the earlier shift from polytheism to monotheism? Or is there some value to keeping a monistic faith "garbed" within theistic language? Here it would be valuable to dialogue with other traditions that also embrace both monistic philosophies and countless tales of gods and spirits. The balance among these is different in each tradition, and indeed it varies (as it does in Judaism) from one school or teacher to another. So too are the historic legacies and contexts of these discussions quite distinct. Nevertheless, we might have much to learn from Eastern discussions of "the one and the many," or the ways in which both a highly abstract theology and a rich legacy of myth are considered to be "true."

Judaism's devotion to personalistic religious language has another side, however. This is one that I would place in the "teaching" column, a value I would hope to share with others. The most basic ethical claim of Judaism is that every human being is created in the image of God. This idea, clearly expressed in Genesis' account of creation (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1-2), was proclaimed by the early rabbinic sage Ben Azzai as the most basic rule of Torah. It is because we proclaim each person to represent God's image that we Jews consider each human life to be ultimately precious and unique. This leads us to the commitment to care for each person. We are obligated to work to bring about the circumstances that will allow every human being to become fully realized as God's image. Our prophetic tradition calls upon us to obliterate hunger, disease, and degradation of human beings, to institute justice and equality, all in the name of faith in God's image.

All this, perhaps the best that Judaism has to offer, is tied to our personalistic view of God, of whom we are a mirror image. Yet the question must be faced: Are we in God's image, as seen from within tradition, or is the anthropomorphic God a projection of our image, one we should seek to overcome? Our attraction to a more abstract theology is serious and long-standing. But we fear setting aside the personalist language of our teachings and prayers, lest we undercut the great humanizing and ethical power they have wrought. This interlocking network of thoughts,

images, and commitments could be greatly enriched in the course of East-West dialogue.

The other pair of notions I would like to propose for such a learning/teaching dialogue has to do with silence, inner tranquility, and rest. One of the great blessings of spiritual life everywhere is its demand that we remove ourselves from slavery to the treadmill of a life devoted to industry, commerce, and acquisition. Ranging from brief daily periods of meditation to weekly Sabbath days to long periods of monastic silence, nearly all the traditions show us ways to restore our humanity by means of slowing down our busy pace.

Such teachings are much needed and appreciated in our day, perhaps more than ever before. One reason, I believe, why meditation has attracted so many in the contemporary West is that we live in a time of tremendous speeding up of consciousness. The shift to electronic media, the possibility of nearly instant contact with people anywhere on the globe, the implied insistence in such means of communication as fax and e-mail that they be attended to immediately, all leave us with a sense of collective breathlessness. This feeling is so widely shared in our culture that we barely notice it. But the need for signposts of one sort or another that will remind us to "SLOW DOWN AND LIVE" has taken on a new urgency.

Judaism's response to this cry is of course the observance of the Sabbath, the weekly "day off" that is meant precisely to save us from the dulling effects of unceasing labor. The insistence that we separate completely from the commercial culture is especially helpful as a restorer of values. Elsewhere I have suggested some key ground rules for a contemporary Shabbat, designed for those who want to preserve the spirit of the holy day without being devoted to the entire regimen of Sabbath laws. The Sabbath has been one of Judaism's great gifts to Western civilization. In our day that gift has to be renewed, not in the spirit of rigid "Sunday blue law" legislation, but as one to be accepted voluntarily and reshaped in response to our contemporary needs. A Shabbat without computer, without television, indeed altogether without "screens" that

keep our eyes drawn to them rather than to one another, might in itself be a great contribution.

But we Jews could stand to learn something in this part of the dialogue as well. Ours is a highly verbal culture; Jews typically love—and are good at—matters that involve words and language. The ideal thing to do on our day of rest, according to traditional Jewish values, is to pray at greater length and to study words of Torah. Rabbis preach on the Sabbath, because Jews have time to listen. We are just beginning to learn, however, how words themselves can create a treadmill, and that true rest should involve periods free from words, even from verbal thoughts. The deepest part of Shabbat relaxation might free us from enslavement to our own thoughts and fantasies, not only from external forms of servitude. The recent growth of interest in meditation within Judaism, including both the import of techniques from elsewhere and the revival of ancient Jewish practices, bears witness to this.

Here I am suggesting that the values taught by the old/new culture of Western Buddhism are deeply compatible with Judaism. Both civilizations offer ways to realize the same goal of liberating the spirit. Both recognize the importance of setting aside a special time for devoting full attention to this task, while understanding that the real goal is to transform all of life, to turn even the most ordinary moments, toward higher consciousness. Each has powerful and well-tested ways of achieving this goal, standing at the very center of two great religious civilizations: meditation for Buddhists, Shabbat for Jews. What could be more appropriate (and consistent with both traditions' great respect for wisdom) than to embrace this new encounter as a rare and wonderful opportunity to learn from one another?

It is in this spirit that I welcome the present volume. It is illuminated by the shining spirit of the seekers whose life-stories fill its pages. Rather than offering a theological treatment of issues in the East-West dialogue, it is a series of testimonies to the enriching of Westerners' lives through their exposure to sacred teachings that come from another corner of human experience. Breaking through walls of cultural distance and

alienation to learn from others, while still respecting our own selves and the traditions that shaped us, will lead us all to a deeper appreciation of what we Jews know as *nishmat kol hai*, the single spirit that inhabits and unites all of life. May we grow together in awareness and in opening our hearts to respond.

### A Christian Perspective

## AN APPRECIATION OF CHRISTIAN APPRECIATIONS OF BUDDHISM'S "STILL WATERS"

WILLIAM R. BURROWS

THE AUTHORS of the essays collected in *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha* show how the Way of the Buddha has deeply influenced their lives. In reading their accounts, it strikes me that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is portrayed as the key to rebirth (John 3:1-11) and the light of the world (1:9 and 8:12). Yet in this book we have a number of Christians finding in the Buddha rebirth into a deeper life and a quiet illumination that casts light upon the ways they trod. The Buddhist Way has become a way to deepen their practice of the Christian Way. At first blush, this may seem odd. At a deeper level, I think it not odd at all.

Had Christian thought developed in different directions, the doctrine of God might have evolved so that the primary analogy for God would have been *energeia/vis* (energy) rather than *eimi/esse* (being). The primary analogy for who Jesus was in his post-incarnational existence might have been *phos/lux* (light), recalling Buddhist images. Please forgive me for going into Greek and Latin and adverting to innumerable theological controversies in the Western tradition. The point I seek to make is that Western theology might well have developed Christian self-understanding in terms of God as the power and energy of being and Jesus as the light wherein we see the inner meaning (*logos/ratio*) of the dynamic that is world process. Had such analogies been the ones that exercised the minds of the

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