

17. Quoted in Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 264. We need not be surprised, therefore, that the Center for Integrative Education, whose “main areas of interest have been the mediation of Eastern and Western thought,” realized the affinity between Heschel and Eastern thought and asked him to become a member of their Board of Correspondents. A copy of this letter, dated June 9, 1972, was given to me by Rabbi Heschel.
18. In *Religions in Dialogue: From Theocracy to Democracy*. Ed. Alan Race and Ingrid Shafer. Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2002, 30
19. *Ibid*, 34.
20. “Religious Diversity and the Millenium,” Internet article at www.hartmaninstitute.com, 2001, 2.
21. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London: Continuum, 2002, 64.
22. *Ibid*, 65.
23. “Jewish-Christian Relations: From Historical Past to Theological Future,” Internet article at www.jcrelations.net, 6.

not which religious path an individual follows, but how human he or she really is. What is most significant is not the religion of an individual but how pious the individual is. I would contend that the idea that the individual life of each human being is of greater significance than one's own particular religious tradition is at the heart of the teaching of both Heschel and Vivekananda.

In my judgment both Vivekananda and Heschel were genuine spiritual teachers who have much to say to us today regarding tolerance for different religious traditions. Both argued that what is most important is the struggle to experience God, which leads to being truly human. What is most critical for them is the ethical quality of a person's life.

Thus it was Vivekananda who not only helped me to understand the spirit of tolerance in the Hindu tradition but also led me to see that this spirit of tolerance is present in my own tradition. For this I am very grateful to him.

Notes:

1. Hans Küng, "Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 194.
2. Quoted in Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953), 185.
3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), 28–29.
4. *Ibid.*, 29.
5. Quoted in Ainslie T. Embaree, *The Hindu Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 322.
6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Concept of Man in Jewish Thought" in *The Concept of Man*, ed S. Radhakrishnan and P. T. Raju, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), 128.
7. Quoted in Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953), 198.
8. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 197.
9. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 214.
10. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Moral Outrage of Vietnam," in Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham J. Heschel, and Michael Novak, *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Association Press, 1967), 50.
11. Swami Nikhilananda, ed. *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953), 183.
12. *Ibid.*, 197.
13. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), 15.
14. Jacob B. Agus, "Context and Challenge – A Response," *Bulletin* 48:2 (spring 1968): 38.
15. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21:2 (January 1966): 126.
16. *Ibid.*, 127.

“Supposing it is a mistake to worship God in the image—doesn’t he know he alone is being worshipped? He will certainly be pleased by that worship.”¹⁷

Heschel’s interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in harmony with his idea that religious pluralism is the will of God not only has created a rich atmosphere for Jewish-Christian dialogue but also has opened the door to Jewish encounter with Eastern traditions.

Since Heschel’s death in 1972, his pluralistic perspective on other faiths has found support among outstanding Jewish thinkers, including a few seminal Orthodox rabbis of our time. Rabbi Irving Greenberg has recently stated: “Any claim that one understanding of God is the definitive, superior one is a form of idolatry.”¹⁸ He goes on to say, “God, too, has many messengers. Pluralism leads me to recognize that the overflowing love of the Divine is never exhausted. My presence, my mind, my revelation, no matter how great, cannot exhaust infinity.”¹⁹ Rabbi David Hartman, the well-known Orthodox philosopher, adds his powerful voice in presenting a vision of other religious traditions that is consistent with Heschel’s view. Hartman believes that a critical task for Jewish thinkers today is to show that one can be a passionate, committed Jew without holding that Judaism is the only true religion: “We must aspire to develop religious forms of commitment and passion that do not require believing that only one tradition reflects the truth. The vitality of religious commitment is not necessarily a function of exclusivity and uniqueness. The presence of other religious traditions need not threaten a person’s total devotion and commitment to a particular tradition. Affirmation does not entail the delegitimization of ‘the other.’”²⁰

In his remarkable book *The Dignity of Difference: Avoiding the Clash of Civilizations*, Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth, makes a most profound case for a pluralistic view that also emerges from the writings of Heschel. The book was written as a response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, after his visit to Ground Zero with other religious leaders and reflecting on the power of religion as a force for good and evil. Sacks believes that “men kill because they believe they possess the truth while their opponents are in error.” For Sacks, as for Greenberg and Hartman, “Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. . . . In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths.”²¹ In the spirit of Heschel and in words that are almost identical, Sacks writes “that the truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God is greater than religion; that he is only partially comprehended by any faith.”²²

Heschel’s view of other faiths and his call for a meeting “between the river Jordan and the river Ganges” is being carried out today by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, the Orthodox rabbi who directs the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions. The Elijah School brings together scholars and spiritual leaders of the major faiths for interfaith dialogue. The school was founded on the belief that “all religions are in some ways instruments of the divine.”²³ The Elijah School is committed to teaching the wisdom of the three Abrahamic faiths as well as the wisdom of the Asian traditions so that we can hear the voice of Rabbi Heschel as well as voice of Swami Vivekananda.

Jewish and Hindu sages were aware from early times that there were different paths to God. Yet it seems to me that what was critical to many of them, as it is for Vivekananda and Heschel, was

Soon after, I decided that I would write my Ph.D. dissertation on Heschel. During the summer of 1972 I presented him with my proposed dissertation topic, part of which would compare his thought to bhakti yoga, the Hindu path of love. Heschel's response after reading my proposal was "a fine outline, a good promise." Although my completed dissertation did not include this comparative aspect of Heschel and the Hindu path of love, I certainly came to see the Jewish stream of thought which is in full agreement with Vivekananda's statement that all traditions produce saints.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Jewish scholars have totally ignored the idea that saints arise outside of the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Jacob Agus, a frequent participant in interfaith dialogue, finds rabbinic sources that support the idea that there may have been Gentile prophets who were greater than Moses.¹⁴ But somehow Jews have forgotten to stress this idea, one that I believe holds great promise for future inter-religious dialogue because it can move us away from an exclusivistic position. In the light of the Jewish idea that saints are produced everywhere, we must not limit Jewish dialogue to Christians and Muslims, but we must also reach out to Hindus and Buddhists. If Bahya ibn Pakuda and Abraham Maimonides, two of the most influential medieval Jewish writers, enriched the Jewish tradition through their study of Islamic mysticism, will not contemporary Jewish thinkers also be enriched by the study of important Hindu thinkers such as Vivekananda?

In his inaugural address delivered at Union Theological Seminary in 1965, Heschel presented a view of the religions of the world that is fully in the spirit of tolerance expressed by Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions. Heschel asserted: "Perhaps it is the will of God that in this aeon there should be diversity in our forms of devotion and commitment to Him. In this aeon diversity of religions is the will of God."¹⁵ Here Heschel seems to leave little doubt that Jews, Christians, and Muslims, in their various ways, are truly worshipping God. But would this statement apply to other world religions whose concept of God is totally different from that of the Jewish tradition? Heschel quotes a passage from the prophet Malachi and follows it with an interpretation which indicates that Eastern traditions are also valid to him:

For from the rising of the sun to its setting My name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts. (Malachi 1:11)

This statement refers undoubtedly to the contemporaries of the prophet. But who were these worshippers of One God? At the time of Malachi there was hardly a large number of proselytes. Yet the statement declares: All those who worship their gods do not know it, but they are really worshipping Me.

It seems that the prophet proclaims that men all over the world, though they confess different conceptions of God, are really worshipping One God, the Father of all men, though they may not be aware of it.¹⁶

It appears to me that Heschel's understanding of Malachi comes very close to the spirit of Vivekananda exemplified in the following statement made by his guru Sri Ramakrishna:

“only a free person knows that the true meaning of existence is experienced in giving, in endowing, in meeting a person face to face, in fulfilling other people’s needs”⁹ and that “some are guilty, all are responsible.”¹⁰ Here is where their affinity is strongest. Both strongly agree that religion cannot be separated from social and political issues. In order to bring about the kingdom of God on earth and beautify all parts of our globe, love of God must manifest itself in love for all human beings.

I first encountered Swami Vivekananda in a course that I took with Bernard Phillips at Temple University in Philadelphia. During the first few weeks of my study of the Hindu tradition, I was moved by a statement that Vivekananda made at the World Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893: “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We not only believe in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.”¹¹ I felt a strong affinity for this view. This may seem surprising in view of the fact that I was raised in an East European traditional Jewish family. My education was also very traditional. When I arrived with my family in the United States at the age of twelve, I studied at Yeshiva Salanter, and then at Talmudical Academy of Yeshiva University. My Jewish education continued at the Jewish Theological Seminary and at the University of Jerusalem. During all those years, we never discussed the major faiths of other human beings. Yet even at that time, I had problems with the traditional Jewish view that Judaism is the only authentic religious tradition.

Although I would not have expressed it in this way, I found it problematic even then that God could be approached only through the Torah. Today, after more than thirty years of study of other religious traditions and being immersed in my own tradition, I find it even more difficult to agree with Jews who are convinced that ours is the superior path. Why not think of ourselves as seekers who are fortunate to belong to a rich tradition that is able to be even more enriching as we learn more deeply of the spiritual life of a tradition other than our own? Isn’t it enough to know that we follow Judaism not because it is superior, but because it is ours? Since it is clear that the concept of the chosen in any of the traditional Jewish sources has never meant that Jews are better than anyone else, why isn’t it possible to understand the concept of the chosen in terms of God choosing the Jews to follow the path of the Torah, and at the same time, choosing the Hindus to follow the Vedas, the Muslims to follow the Qur’an, and for Christians to follow Jesus of Nazareth?

I was also very moved by Vivekananda’s statement at the final session of the World Parliament of Religions on September 27, 1893: “If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: it has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.”¹² I was drawn by this statement not only to seek a deeper knowledge of Eastern religions but to see if there is anything in my own tradition that would support this view which I found so enticing. I began by rereading the works of my teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel and was struck by his statement that Judaism could be enriched if dialogue would occur “between the River Jordan and the River Ganges.” Heschel was one of the few Jews that I had ever met who believed that it was “vitaly important . . . for Judaism to reach out into non-Jewish culture in order to absorb elements which it may use for the enrichment of its life and thought. . . .”¹³

this life. Then all doubt ceases. So the best proof a Hindu sage gives about God is: “I have seen God.”²

Similarly, Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the authentic Jewish mystics of the twentieth century, cites the Hebrew Bible as a source of Jewish longing for immediate contact with the divine: “Not all of the people of the Bible are satisfied with awareness of God’s power and presence. There are those ‘that seek Him, that seek Thy face O God of Jacob’ (Psalms 24:6). . . . At Sinai, according to legend, Israel was not content to receive the divine words through an intermediary. They said to Moses, ‘We want to hear the words of our King from Himself. . . . We want to see our King.’³ Heschel then quotes from Judah Halevi, the great medieval Jewish poet: “To see the face of my King is my sole desire. I fear none but Him; I revere only Him. Would that I might see Him in a dream! I would continue to sleep for all eternity. Would that I might behold His face within my heart! Mine eyes would never ask to look at anything else.”⁴ Throughout his works, Heschel speaks of the divine-human encounter, of the possibility of experiencing the presence of God. Certainly Heschel, the theist, and Vivekananda, the monist, describe the mystical experience differently. However, both would agree that what is most important is the transformation that is brought about by this experience. For both, the key is “to forget the self,” and by so doing to experience a tremendous concern for other human beings and the world.

For Vivekananda and Heschel, saving the world seems to be more central than personal salvation. In fact, personal salvation is undertaken only as a means of saving the world. Throughout his writings, Vivekananda emphasizes the divine nature of human beings. According to him, the central aim of man and woman lies in “aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature.”⁵

This emphasis is also found in the thought of Heschel. He insists that the fundamental statement about human beings, according to the Jewish tradition, is found in the following passage in Genesis: “And God said, ‘I will make man in My image, after My likeness. . . .’ And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (1:26–27). Heschel interprets this statement as follows:

*The intention is not to identify “the image and likeness” with a particular quality or attribute of man, such as reason, speech, power or skill. It does not refer to something which in later systems was called “the best in man,” “the divine spark,” “the eternal spirit” or “the immortal element” in man. It is the whole man and every man who was made in the image and likeness of God. It is both body and soul, sage and fool, saint and sinner, man in his joy and in his grief, in his righteousness and wickedness. The image is not in man; it is man.*⁶

I am not attempting to blur the distinction between Vivekananda the Hindu monist and Heschel the Jewish theist. In the Jewish tradition a human being is never divine. But what stands out for me is the preciousness of human beings that emerges in the works of these two thinkers. The keystone for both Vivekananda and Heschel is love of God and love and compassion for human beings. God is central, but both stress that this love must be manifested in love for human beings. Vivekananda states that “the gist of all worship: to be good and to do good to others”⁷ and that “each is responsible for the evil anywhere in the world.”⁸ Similarly Heschel claims that

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Swami Vivekananda & Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
Harold Kasimow

My thesis, therefore, is: no world peace without peace among religions, no peace among religions without dialogue between the religions, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another.1

This extraordinary statement by the Christian theologian Hans Küng must be taken as one of the great challenges for our time if we are to preserve our fragile planet. Küng's assertion that there can be "no world peace without peace among the religions" challenges the religious leaders of the world to interpret their respective traditions in such a way as to encourage spiritual strength that would defeat the violence and destruction, the persecution and intolerance often historically committed in the name of religion. Leaders must face the fact that all religions have brought beauty and astonishing enrichment to millions of believers, but they have simultaneously been the cause of great suffering and anguish because of their exclusive claims to infallibility.

I am convinced that the belief that there can be only one valid religious tradition is a major cause for the hostility between people of different faiths and is the main obstacle to authentic interfaith dialogue. If religious people are to eradicate the forces of violence and evil and help to bring peace, they must first renounce the exclusivistic attitude toward other religions and turn to the vision and wisdom of the spiritual giants of the world's religious traditions. In this paper I will briefly examine some key ideas of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), focusing on their attitudes toward other religious traditions. I believe that the lives and works of these two spiritual teachers can help to transform our views of other people of faith and thereby help us to mend the world.

Although Vivekananda was a Hindu monist and Heschel was a Jewish theist, I am amazed at the remarkable similarities in their views on many significant issues. Their affinity is particularly striking not only in their views of other religious traditions, but also on such critical issues as the concept of humanity and their vision of God. Let me be very clear that by similar I do not mean identical. The differences are real. But I am convinced that what they have in common is more important than the points on which they differ. And it is that which is more important to be affirmed. By becoming aware of the common elements of these two thinkers, one nurtured in the Hindu tradition and the other in East European Judaism, we are more likely to be open to the spirituality of all people of faith.

Both Vivekananda and Heschel were philosophers and mystics who were critical of certain aspects and doctrines of their own traditions. They did not see theological subtleties as the most important issues. Their concern was how to save the humanity of human beings. Most important was the righteousness of each individual. Each stressed that to attain such a goal one must attempt to experience God in one's own life, to truly come to feel the presence of God. As is clearly shown in the following statement, Vivekananda believed that one can experience the reality of God in one's own life and that such a mystical vision of God is preceded by ethical discipline: "He reveals Himself to the pure heart; the pure and the stainless see God, yea, even in