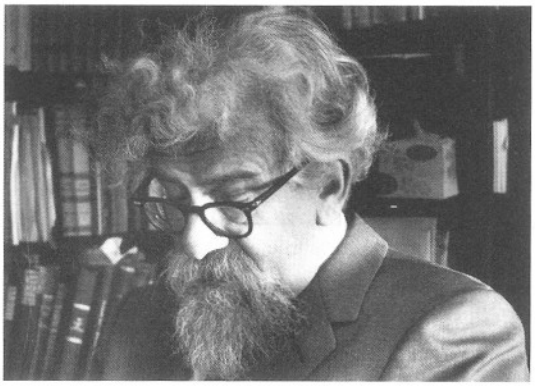
Abraham Joshua Heschel

Philosophy, Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

Edited by Stanisław Krajewski and Adam Lipszyc



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Alon Goshen-Gottstein

Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue – Formulating the Questions

Heschel taught us how to ask questions. Heschel taught us how important questions are, how they open us up to new understandings, to another reality. Heschel taught us how important it is to ask the right questions. It therefore seems fitting to open our reflections on the significance of Heschel for interreligious dialogue by posing questions. The questions I wish to pose grow out of an already published study on Heschel and interreligious dialogue.[1] They grow out of my close reading of Heschel's seminal essay "No Religion Is an Island," which may be seen as Heschel's manifesto for appropriate interreligious relations. I would like to highlight these questions as an introduction to our common deliberations on Heschel and interreligious dialogue. The significance of the following questions is not simply that they can help to sharpen our understanding of Heschel and his contribution to interreligious reflection at a given moment in time. Rather, they draw on the assumption that Heschel is a role model in the field of interreligious relations and that his reflections in this area summon us to follow in his footsteps.[2] However, simply quoting Heschel and reiterating his wisdom will not suffice. While recognizing that Heschel is important and that he inspires us to follow in his footsteps, one must also recognize that more work must be undertaken and that in many ways Heschel has only adumbrated for us a contemporary theory of interreligious relations, leaving much work for us, his followers, to undertake. Thus, Heschel provides both inspiration and challenge. It is my hope that the questions I shall formulate below will allow us to focus the inspiration that Heschel provides us with in ways that allow us to meet the challenge of following the path he broke open.

Personal and Spiritual Orientation

The first set of questions I would like to pose touches upon the attitude of heart and mind, the way of being that defines and contextualizes one's engagement in interreligious relations. Simply put, it seems to me that following Heschel should not be equated with accepting his ideas, his position on how Jews and Judaism should relate to other people and religions. Heschel did more than articulate ideas. In this, as in other domains, he modeled a way of being.

1. If we recognize that Heschel is not only worthy of following, but that following him could also imply going beyond Heschel himself, in thought or action, then the following question presents itself: What is the existential, spiritual and emotional orientation and posture from within which we engage in interreligious relations? Heschel made a significant contribution

1 A. Goshen-Gottstein, "No Religion Is an Island: Following the Trail Blazer," *Shofar* 26:1 (2007), pp. 72–111.

2 My own analysis explicitly refers to Heschel as a path breaker and focuses on the theological and other challenges involved in the attempt to consciously follow in his path.

to the theory and theology of interreligious relations. He did so, however, from a place of deep emotional and spiritual engagement with the lives of others. To follow Heschel is thus not only a matter for the intellect. Heschel invites us to a deep emotional engagement and to a genuine commitment to this area of work. It seems to me that these are the preconditions for following in Heschel's footsteps. What, then, are the necessary emotional and spiritual conditions, attitudes and overall way of being upon which both the application and the furthering of Heschel's work is predicated?

2. Heschel's emotional and existential approach to other faiths and their adherents did not develop in the neutrality of his study. It grew out of a web of personal relations, out of formative friendships. It is fair to say that some of Heschel's closest spiritual friends were men of different faiths, in his case: primarily Christians. In fact, Heschel may have well felt greater spiritual affinity with them than with some of his Jewish colleagues. Interreligious relations and the growth in theological reflection they lead to are thus grounded in personal relations, in deep friendships. This too presents us with a challenge and a yardstick for our own engagement in interreligious relations. What is the place of interreligious friendship in our life? How deep and transformative are our friendships? Is our work in this field appropriately nourished by such friendships? Formal or representative involvement in interreligious relations, important though it may be, cannot be truly transformative without the basis of profound friendships. To carry on Heschel's vision, rather than to just apply some of its insights, thus requires a level of interpersonal commitment and engagement, expressed through friendship.

The question of friendship takes us from the biographical and the personal to an important area of Heschel's thought: the human person. In "No Religion Is an Island," Heschel opens his reflections on the meaning of encountering a person of a different faith by reflecting on the meaning of the very meeting of another human being. Because of our common humanity we must not only face contemporary challenges together; we can also feel the common touch of God, reaching our common humanity. Thus, engagement in interreligious dialogue, following Heschel, would be founded upon an understanding of the human person. This once again constitutes an invitation to reflect and to deepen our understanding of the human person, as a foundation for engagement in interreligious dialogue. More specifically, we find in Heschel an awareness of the special example and inspiration provided by the saints of other religions. Saints are, so to speak, an example of humanity, only more so. Thus, reflection on the human person leads to reflection on the lives of saints. Studying and reflecting on the lives of saints of other religions offers an opportunity to increase mutual respect and to find additional sources of inspiration for behavioral ideals, across religious boundaries. I believe that this is an extremely fruitful area for interreligious dialogue. The example offered by other human beings highlights the fullness of human potential and offers an inspiration that cuts across the boundaries of religious traditions. Reference to the fullness of the human person, as made manifest through a particular religious tradition, allows us to sidestep the issues that Heschel recognizes would be issues regarding which we cannot reach understanding. The fulfillment of human spiritual potential, as exemplified in the lives of saints allows us to appreciate the fruits of faith, regardless of its content, seen through the prism of the human person. This points to a vast area for future research and study that could greatly enrich the field of interreligious dialogue. A direct line thus connects Heschel's reflections and this important area for future study.

3. Heschel's reader is struck by the sincerity and integrity with which he is ready to examine his own tradition, while engaging that of the other. Heschel does not try to make Judaism prettier or more attractive than he truly finds it, and when he faces an interlocutor from another tradition he does not try to justify it at all costs. Rather, he is willing to engage in self-criticism in the context of, and as a consequence of, encountering the other. This presents us with the following challenge: To what extent must genuine involvement in interreligious dialogue be accompanied by sincere self-criticism and self-examination? Certainly if interreligious dialogue is seen as an authentic spiritual, rather than diplomatic, exercise, it would seem that this kind of self introspection is a necessary condition, as well as a blessed outcome, of the encounter with the other. This in turn is predicated upon, as well as leads to, the recognition that our religious traditions are not perfect. Significantly, this is the concluding note of "No Religion Is an Island." It takes special theological courage to be able to admit imperfections in our tradition, let alone to integrate such awareness into how we construct our theology. Heschel thus profoundly challenges us to confront and recognize the imperfection in our own religions, even as we uphold and love them, in faith and faithfulness.

4. Heschel's attitude to other religions as well as his ability to apply a self-critical attitude are born of the recognition that God and religion are not identical. God is perfect; religion, by its very definition, is not. Our religions are instruments through which divine goals are achieved. But they are necessarily imperfect inasmuch as they mediate the divine purpose through human structures, institutions and actions. What is the basis for making this distinction? Obviously, it is based upon theological analysis and can therefore be shared with others. However, I believe there is also another dimension, upon which this recognition is based. It seems Heschel's own spiritual experiences and his sense of the immediacy of divine presence, as distinct from the concrete historical and theological forms of Judaism, also contribute much to this recognition. Nevertheless, is it sufficient for us to base this distinction on the conceptual analysis of Heschel, or, for that matter, our own? Does the distinction between God and religion also require a certain type of religious experience? How could such a religious experience be cultivated? To the degree that Heschel's entire theory of interreligious pluralism leans heavily on this distinction we ought to consider how others may internalize it and make it a part of their experience. Furthermore, if we seek to communicate this recognition it to others, it must also be expressed in the language of traditional sources. Thus, this key insight calls for further experience, as well as study, articulation and translation.

Historical Questions

5. In thinking of Heschel's contribution to interreligious dialogue and its theory, one must ask wherein lies his original contribution and in what ways does his thought go beyond that of earlier thinkers. The claim I make in my article deserves to be considered: To what extent is Heschel truly a novelty and a fresh starting point in the theory of interreligious dialogue, or in what we might call today the theology of religions? In private correspondence, the Israeli philosopher Eliezer Schweid claimed that the kind of reflection that Heschel engages in might already be found in the thought of Moses Mendelssohn. Similarly, one may argue that contemporaries like Martin Buber, not to mention Franz Rosenzweig, also considered Christianity as part of their theological reflections. Still, I would argue there is something unique and specific to Heschel, on account of which we should see him as opening a new chapter in Jewish reflections on

other religions. Changing times led to the development of new paradigms in interreligious relations. Interfaith dialogue is a form of relationship that should be distinguished from the kind of philosophy-leading-to-interreligious-tolerance, in which Mendelssohn engaged under very different political and historical circumstances. Similarly, the constructs that thinkers such as Buber and Rosenzweig developed were articulated within a relational paradigm that was still heavily influenced by the threat or invitation to convert to Christianity. Heschel operates from a different political, social and relational paradigm, and this is what allows him to develop his thought in novel directions. Different historical circumstances also open up new existential, philosophical and theological opportunities. Consequently, even if he is indebted in various ways to earlier thinkers, his thought is more radical in making room for other religions, as is his personal experience. Religion is understood differently, and consequently new possibilities open up for mutual inspiration and encounter, in ways that far exceed earlier statements of Judaism's views of other religions. My claim is therefore that he is the father of Jewish reflection on the meaning of interfaith dialogue as a new form of cultural practice. If that is so, then we are led to a fuller appreciation of Heschel's novelty and contribution. Consequently, is Heschel indeed the first Jewish theoretician of interreligious dialogue?

Theological and Philosophical Questions

6. Heschel should be understood as offering a prophetic insight. The validity of his insight is not necessarily dependent upon how convincing the readings of traditional sources that he offers as corroboration for his insight are. Thus, Heschel can be considered both the source of a prophetic inspiration and its translator, casting it in the language of tradition. It is important to distinguish between these two dimensions. Some of Heschel's readings may be weak and may fail to convince his readers. Yet, this does not detract from the validity of his spiritual insight. It does, however, charge his followers with the duty of doing a better job at translating his insights. What further work of translation must his followers engage in? Such translation obviously includes reference to traditional sources and to how they can justify his insights. But translation also includes the ability to carry his insights into other domains. How does one educate in light of Heschel's insights on other religions?[3] How should communal policy be shaped in light of his views? And do they, or should they, have any impact on the halakhic view of other religions? All these aspects of translation are vital if his message is to be carried forward within the Jewish community and if it is to play a formative role in Jewish education.

7. Heschel articulates a Jewish theory of interreligious pluralism. A close reading of his work suggests he carefully skirts the issue of relativism. On the one hand, he wishes to affirm the validity of other religions as means of reaching God. On the other hand, he never

3 The problem of educating in light of Heschel's heritage is anything but simple. His complex prophetic message has almost in all cases undergone what Cornell West termed "Santa Claussification," in which it gets reduced to a simple message of good will, losing its prophetic challenge and cutting edge. This phenomenon was much discussed at a recently held conference at the Melton Center for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University (December 23–24, 2007), titled: "Social Responsibility and Educational Audacity: [Jewish] Education, Cultural Criticism and Social Activism." Particularly relevant was the paper by Elliot Malamet, "The Mark of Cain: The Roots of Heschel's Social Vision."

goes as far as to say that all religions are equally valid means of reaching Him. Heschel is obviously aware of the challenge of relativism and seeks to hold the rope at both ends. His interpreters struggle with the question of his true intentions.[4] Struggling to understand Heschel is really grappling with this core issue, and it is a core issue for all who are engaged in the theory of interreligious dialogue.[5] Thus, Heschel takes us a long way, but his work still invites further reflection: Must a theory of interreligious pluralism be relativistic, and if not: how is relativism avoided?

8. Heschel only adumbrates an attitude to religions other than Christianity. His most significant religious other is Christianity. Are Heschel's insights simply to be transferred to the broader context of contemporary multi-faith relations, or would they be altered in some way in the process? Would Heschel's religious anthropology, his sense of religious experience and other key components of his interreligious vision be stated differently when the horizons of religious experience and reflection are broadened? Does Heschel provide us with a methodology for engaging religions other than Christianity and is his resort to religious language and experience adequate for the broadening of horizons?

9. Heschel consciously excludes the possibility of meaningful exchange regarding the core of religious faith. This core must remain within the realm of personal or collective belief and should remain outside the purview of interreligious dialogue. This is a position that makes as much sense today as it did when it was articulated decades ago. Nevertheless, some advances have been made in the study of religion.[6] Two academic disciplines have come to the fore over the last decade or two that have also made advances possible in the field of theological dialogue. The one is the emergence of the field of theology of religions. This field seeks to articulate a view of other religions, seen from the vantage point of a particular religion. Within its purview also comes the consideration of other traditions' faith. Perhaps more neutral is the discipline of Comparative Theology.[7] In what ways could we then go beyond Heschel in light of these developments in the study of religion?

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4 See H. Kasimow, "Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18:3 (1981), p. 430ff; D. Hartman, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Heroic Witness," in *A Heart of Many Rooms* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1999), pp. 188–191.

5 We note that it is, to a large extent, the defining philosophical issue of the present Catholic Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI, for whom the interreligious front is but one of several on which this issue is tackled.

6 This is just as true for the parallel exclusion of theological dialogue from the exchanges of Jews and Christians, argued for by Rabbi Soloveitchik. For a comparison of both thinkers' attitudes to dialogue, see R. Kimelman, "Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish-Christian Relations," *The Edah Journal* 4:2 (2004) (electronic version; hardcopy published in *Modern Judaism* 24 [2004] pp. 251–271). Despite the enormous difference in the attitude to other religions, in the nature of their exchanges with practitioners of other religions and in the models they envision for such relations, both thinkers do share an understanding that excludes the core of faith from the field of dialogue. It is likely that both arrived at this position as much from an attempt to safeguard dialogue from slipping into proselytism as from their respective understandings of the nature of faith and its attendant experience.

7 A pioneer in this field is Francis Clooney. See his bibliographical survey, "The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology: A Bibliographical Review (1989–1995)," *Theological Studies* 56:3 (1995), pp. 521–550 as well as his website http://www2.bc.edu/~clooney/Comparative/ct.html. Clooney has plummeted the depths of Hindu and Christian theologies, touching upon areas that for Heschel might have been thought unapproachable. His work, as well as that of other scholars, demonstrates what fruitful exchanges are possible even around the core of faith.

Educational Questions

10. I have suggested that Heschel is very much aware of the public he is addressing. A comparison of similar presentations made to Jewish and to Christian audiences points to Heschel's sensitivity to his audience and to the way in which he adapts his message to the needs of his audience. Significantly, Heschel is freer when he speaks to Christians, than when he is speaking to Jews. This is characteristic of the interfaith situation as broadly practiced by religious thinkers and leaders. One often makes more radical or more daring statements when facing outwards than when facing one's own community.[8]

This challenges us in the following way: how do we construct our theologies within and without? To what extent are we willing to say to our own communities, in representing ourselves as well as the other, the same things we are willing to say when putting on the best public face for our religion? What internal theological and educational moves must be made in order to bring these fields of expression closer to one another and what kind of language and means of expression are suitable for each of the domains of internal and external discourse?

Contrasting insider-talk with outsider-talk leads to a consideration of the language, rhetoric and sources used in making an argument. The sources used by Heschel are almost exclusively biblical. This is in part a consequence of his own deep immersion in biblical materials, and is in fact characteristic of his entire oeuvre. These are also the sources that are most suitable for an exchange between Jews and Christians. Thus, the nature of the audience also defines the kind of sources used. What sources would be appropriate for an insider's discourse? Would, in keeping with Jewish tradition, a heavier reliance on rabbinic and later materials be appropriate? Could Heschel's attitude to other religions be successfully conveyed through the use of rabbinic materials, or does the reliance on biblical passages at key points in his argument also tell us something about the theology and the context from within which it grows and can be received? And most fundamentally: what is the relationship between Heschel's theology of other religions and the halakhic tradition? The halakhah is probably the most formative force in Jewish reflection upon and attitude to other religions. How can Heschel's message be communicated to a Jewish audience without reference to the halakhah and how might inclusion of halakhic perspectives alter or affect Heschel's message? The reader of "No Religion Is an Island" learns next to nothing about the most formative category in Jewish relations with other religions, *Avoda Zara*, foreign worship, approximating idolatry. I think it is fair to state that

8 A striking example of this may be found in a statement issued by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, in the context of a recently launched dialogue with Hindu leaders. The summary statement affirms the respective faith of both religions in one Supreme Being. This statement, which comes close to acknowledging a common God for both religions flies in the face of common halakhic sensibilities, as these relate to the assessment of Hinduism in terms of *Avoda Zara*, foreign worship, or more grossly: idolatry. It is not so much that the Chief Rabbi of Israel forgot that only a year earlier the halakhic legitimacy of a billion dollars worth of wigs was called into question, on account of association with Hindu worship in idol-worshipping (I use the term in a value free way, without making a pronouncement on the subject theologically or halakhically) temples. Rather, what he was willing to declare in far-away Delhi, away from his constituency, was more open and tolerant than what anything he could have said on home turf. At the very least, willingness to sign such a declaration suggests that outward facing discourse can conveniently ignore fundamental issues and concerns that would be uppermost in an inwards facing discourse. The statement of the Chief Rabbinate may be found at: http://www.engagingamerica.org/ajc/news/index.asp?partnerID=133&subHeadID=151.

an internal Jewish audience, that is traditionally formed, could not accept a theology of other religions that ignores this cardinal topic.

11. Interreligious dialogue is essentially an elitist activity. Heschel certainly felt it was and he was explicit about it. His theory is thus intended primarily for highly educated elites – religious and academic leadership – who are brought to an encounter with one another. It is probably the case that in the 60s interreligious dialogue was indeed limited primarily to elites. However, the activity of dialogue has blossomed to previously unimagined dimensions, primarily under the pressures of inter-group relations and the need to enhance the work of peace and coexistence. While in the academic domain dialogue is still carried on by elites, there is a broad phenomenon of grass roots dialogue that reaches deep into the community. Such dialogue exposes participants to the very concerns that led Heschel to circumscribe dialogue to the learned elites. Ignorance, about one's own religion as well as that of the other, does not serve dialogue well and woe to the dialogue that is based on little knowledge. But such is much of what passes for dialogue nowadays. One wonders how Heschel would have reacted to the mushrooming of interfaith dialogue, regardless of how much knowledge is brought to the interfaith encounter. How should Heschel's legacy be carried forth into this broader context of dialogue? What are the educational challenges and preconditions that must be met in order to ensure successful and meaningful dialogue at the popular community level?

12. The concluding paragraph of "No Religion Is an Island" puts forth the notion of mutual help. We are all in need of each other's help and mutual help emerges as an important paradigm in the relations between religions. It is no accident that Heschel thus concludes this major essay. The recognition that we are all in need of aid is fundamental to his spiritual vision. The need for help runs deeper than our common need to address the world's burning problems. We are also faced, within each of our traditions, with spiritual problems that impair the effective spiritual work of our religions. The call for mutual help is extended to the domain of religion proper and the help that we can give each other is in fulfilling our deepest spiritual vocations. This constitutes an invitation to Heschel's followers, to us, to examine where indeed we are in need of help. Heschel takes us beyond readiness for self-criticism. Heschel dares us to expose our weakness first to our own eyes and then to the eyes of the other. But such exposure is intended as a means of bringing about healing and transformation, through the help received from the other. We are thus invited by Heschel to consider: Where are we in need of the other? In what way can the other help us, each of our religions, in addressing our spiritual ills? This is perhaps the ultimate question that emerges from Heschel's work: How can interreligious dialogue serve as a means of aiding each of our traditions spiritually, by providing much needed help to overcome the imperfections that have taken hold within all of our religions?