



The Elijah Institute

RELIGIONS AND REPENTANCE

Growth in Religious Traditions, Facing a New Era

Papers of the Elijah School Conference

in honor of the Visit of Pope John Paul II
to the Holy Land, March 21, 2000

Synopsis by Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein

Three papers have been presented for our forthcoming conference. The Christian perspective is represented by Fr. Franz Jozef van Beeck S.J, of Loyola University. The Jewish perspective is represented by Chief Rabbi Rene Samuel Sirat of France. The Muslim perspective is represented by Sheikh Professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi of the Cultural Institute of the Italian Islamic Community in Rome.

Each of the traditions has approached the subject drawing upon its own resources for conversion and repentance, and applying them to the religion as a whole, posing the question - how can the religion I represent repent and grow to become more of an instrument for God's will. By focusing on this question we hope to shift discussion from blaming one another to a process of mutual growth and self-examination, induced by the presence of the other.

The Jewish perspective is grounded in the notion of repentance being one of the beings that was created before creation. This signifies that all of creation is endowed with the possibility and necessity of repenting, as a constant way of life. Repentance, suggests Rabbi Sirat, corresponds to the Sabbath, the day of return to the Lord. The seventh day stands as a gateway to the eighth day, symbolizing the messianic era. Repentance is thus the gateway to a new era. Repentance is, however, dependent on our free choice. Humanity thus has a choice at the present moment. If it follows one path, it could destroy itself. If, however, it follows the path of *Teshuva*, of return to God, this would lead it to the eighth day, the paradisiacal realization of the promises that come from closeness to God.

Repentance is grounded in history, for one must repent from the point at which one is located in history. No reflection upon Jewish history can ignore the centrality of the Shoah to Jewish memory. Rabbi Sirat brings to the interreligious conversation the presence of the victim, of the one on account of whom the other must repent. Before addressing Judaism's own process of repentance, he feels compelled to address the repentance of others in relation to the Shoah. He expresses great admiration at the way in which in recent years repentance and the asking for forgiveness have characterized the attitude of governments and organizations to the Jewish people. However, he cautions, repentance must come from the heart and not from the lips. It cannot be an outward show, but a genuine internal process of remorse. It is significant that nowhere in his paper does Rabbi Sirat suggest that the Jewish people forgive. Forgiving seems to be in the domain of God. Israel can only express admiration and appreciation for the *Teshuva* of its former persecutors. It is clear, however, that through such repentance a new future is opened for all.

Rabbi Sirat rejects the possibility of mutual repentance, as though the victim had to repent

along with the victimizer. Yet, Judaism still has much to repent for. Still around the theme of the Shoah, Rabbi Sirat suggests it is blasphemy to suggest that the Shoah could have taken place because of the sins of the generation that perished. Whoever entertains any such ideas must repent from them. The same is true for the rabbinical authorities that gave ill counsel to their communities, and prevented them from escaping the Shoah.

Rabbi Sirat then points to other areas in which Judaism is in need of repentance. These include the status of women, the relationship between different parts of the Jewish people, especially Ashkenazim and Sephardim (Jews from Western and Oriental countries). Sirat then painfully examines the ethics of war, and how fighting and the ongoing military struggle have had a pernicious effect upon Israel's soul. Finally, Israel and diaspora relations are considered as theme for repentance for the Jewish people.

It is important to note that Sirat's paper is anchored strongly in a historical context. The call to repentance emerges from within the context of history, and various ailments that have come to plague the Jewish people. Significantly, Sirat does not consider that there is something in Judaism's own spiritual growth that must be subject of repentance. Nor does he suggest that the basic attitude of Judaism to other religions (in the religious, rather than the national sense) is relevant to the topic of redemption.

These are precisely the two foci that characterize the work of van Beeck. Van Beeck, writing from a Catholic interfaith perspective, considers repentance in the context of relations between religions, rather than reflecting on any number of ailments that may plague the Catholic world itself. His starting point too is historical. Indeed, the paper emerges out of an acute awareness of Christianity's historical past, including the atrocities of the Shoah. It grows out of the work of repentance the Catholic church has already undertaken, and tries to take that work a stage further, in relation to the Catholic Church's attitude to other religions. The ultimate question for van Beeck is what is the meaning of repentance in Christianity's relations with other religions. Van Beeck suggests that more is involved than the demand of pardon for past wrongs.

The contemporary world situation presents us with ever new situations of interreligious coexistence. These challenge the Church to examine how it has positioned itself in relation to other religions, and to pose the question of whether we also have something to receive from and to learn from others? Today the fated and bloody encounter of the past has the potential to become a true human encounter. As such it carries the potential for self transformation. Painstaking discovery of the other is the royal road to self awareness. The ability and the openness to discover the other go hand in hand with the awareness that no religion is above criticism. Recognition of one's own wrong finds a counterpart in the genuine openness to the reality of the other.

What are Christianity's resources for the type of transformation and growth occasioned by the contemporary meeting of worlds? Van Beeck offers praise and repentance as two keys. Following the lead of St. Augustine, he suggests that praising God and accusing ourselves are two sides of the same coin. We must be willing to properly accuse ourselves of past wrongs, not trying to justify, contextualize or excuse. We must learn to be ashamed. And the ultimate spiritual resource for this is the discovery of Jesus the persecuted, as he identifies himself with the persecuted. The side that previously marshalled a Jesus triumphant in battle must now come to recognize in humility the presence of Jesus with the persecuted, the ignorant and the wayward. Chagall's white crucifixion offers van Beeck a powerful image of the discovery of a different dimension of Christ, with whom we must come to identify

ourselves.

The meekness and humility are then expressed in the capacity to deliver oneself to the hands of the other, by opening oneself to others through a question, as Jesus himself did in asking "What do you think I am?" The interfaith context forces us to open ourself to the querying gaze of the other, and to the process of mutual self-discovery that comes from it. This, for van Beeck, is a form of praising God, by glorying in God, in the world, in each other, and thus in ourselves. True spiritual self knowledge thus passes through the knowledge of the other, and in order to do so Christianity must return to the wellsprings of repentance, through contrition and shame for past wrongs, coupled with a genuine openness to the other, as a form of glorifying God.

Like Rabbi Sirat, Father van Beeck too considers that the ultimate possibility of growth and repentance is a function of choice. The world of encounter in which we live today could lead either to war or peace. It will lead to peace only if we can stop living our religions politically and instead, let ourselves be fed at the wellsprings of repentance within each religion. Only thus can something new and gracious be created out of centuries-old history of blaming and meting punishment to each other.

Sheikh Palazzi in his own way argues for exactly the same thing. His paper offers a Muslim perspective for the call to regenerate religion from the wellsprings of its spiritual reality. From this basis he proceeds to critique various phenomena in the Islamic world, many of which are purely political, that are in need of spiritual transformation. Palazzi begins by a presentation of two Islamic concepts: **Tawbah**, turning towards God, and **Istighfar**, the asking for forgiveness, both for oneself and in prayer for others. **Tawbah** is a total movement towards God, similar to Greek **Metanoia**. The fruit of a full turning to God is the placing of God above all else. Such full turning toward God must of necessity encounter obstacles, and go through tests, whereby it is purified. The ultimate spiritual claim is that of the love of God. Full turning to God in love implies making God more important than all human relations. It also means making God more important than our religious officers and leaders, and the familiar forms of our religions, that may be an extension of our own sense of self. The love of God asks us to sacrifice all that is in the natural order, and some forms of the religious life come as part of that order.

Placing God above all else, and raising the call for a full turning towards him, allows Palazzi to then investigate a series of painful issues in contemporary Islamic society, as needing the spiritual transformation of **Tawbah**. Palazzi examines the attitude to sacred space and the concomitant possessiveness that is often attached to it, both within the Islamic regimes and in the context of the possibility of sharing the sacred in the holy land. Like Sirat, he too touches upon the status of women in society. Education and the equal opportunity it should afford, beyond the boundaries of specific Islamic ideologies are considered by him. The use of wealth and charity as instruments for ideological conquest, rather than for pure spiritual work is one of the ills of contemporary Islam. Human rights and dignity are amongst the topics briefly considered. Conflict resolution by peaceful means is a major challenge facing the Muslim world, where so many conflicts are resolved through violence.

The three papers here collected share in the attempt to articulate a theology of transformation for their religions, based upon the internal resources for repentance that each of the traditions provides. They do so while consciously engaging the other religious traditions in dialogue. Despite their different emphases, they express a common conviction that self-transformation in today's world takes place through the coming together of two forces - the drawing from one's own traditional wellsprings, and the openness to the encounter with the other. The

three papers all point to the strong link of religion to past and present history, and to political and ideological structures. The interfaith encounter cannot be severed from its historical context, and the accompanying burden of repentance, correction and forgiving in human relations. However, the challenge of the contemporary situation extends past the asking of pardon for the past. All religions emerge as in need of purification and growth. Such growth must come from the source of the religions, namely: the presence of the living God, towards whom one must turn and return. Yet, past and present history teach us that such turning can no longer occur in isolation. In the contemporary world the movement towards God must be accompanied by the movement towards one another, both in order to heal past wounds, and in order to hear in fresh ways how God speaks.

The papers here presented to his Holiness Pope John Paul II thus present us with the challenge of how we can not only ask pardon for past wrongs, but for how in the process we can rediscover ourselves as we truly come to know the other. They present us with the collective challenge of articulating the spiritual resources in our tradition for spiritual regeneration, carried out in a world in which we are mutually aware of the fact that none of our religions is beyond criticism. We ask the Holy Father in his address to further illuminate us on these matters, and to provide for his own faithful, as well as for members of other faiths who are eager to receive his wisdom, further stimulus, instruction and inspiration that will help all religions become more and more what they are designed to be - instruments of God's will.