

SHARING WISDOM – THE CASE OF FORGIVENESS

PROJECT SYNTHESIS

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Finding a Common Voice and Sharing Wisdom

The wealth of insight and stimulating ideas found in the papers prepared by scholars from the Elijah Interfaith Academy on “Sharing Wisdom” is both impressive and inspiring. The reflections and texts can sustain discussions for a long time to come, and indeed I hope they do. My purpose in the present essay is not to summarize or repeat what the individual papers have suggested. Rather, I would like to pull together various insights and key notions found in the individual papers and to draw a composite picture of the subject. As a composite picture, it seeks to draw on the presentations of all the papers, attempting to find the commonalities, without flattening the differences between the individual traditions. Of course, the synthesis is my own personal attempt at offering an overview of the project. As such it must suffer from my own biases, primary among which is my theistic approach to issues (to which a Buddhist could take exception) and possibly my own Jewish orientation as well. I therefore offer the following synthesis as a personal statement, rather than as a consensus reached by our group of scholars. The draft resolution that follows my own personal synthesis, by contrast, does reflect the common voice of the entire think tank and constitutes the outcome of group deliberations. If, as I believe, the gap between my personal synthesis and the draft resolution is not too large, this is a hopeful sign that my own synthesis is close to the collective spirit of our think tank.

Perhaps the place to begin tackling the challenge of drawing together the different perspectives expressed in the papers is with a recognition of significant differences in the very approach to sharing wisdom. Different religions seem to approach the subject in different ways, and with differing degrees of comfort and openness. While all our scholars have successfully engaged the topic and pointed the way forward from the perspective of their tradition, there seem to be different levels of comfort with the notion of sharing wisdom, different degrees of concern in relation to the risks and dangers involved in sharing wisdom and different degrees of calling for care and caution. Thus, judging by the tone, as well as the content, of the papers, the Jewish and Buddhist perspectives seem to be on opposite sides of the spectrum, with

Judaism exhibiting the greatest degree of concern and care in relation to our project, while Buddhism and its notion of the use of skillful means to adapt the core teaching to changing circumstances has the easiest time relating to our project. Islam seems to exhibit concerns similar to those of Judaism, which stands to reason, given the common starting point of a religion based on revealing divine wisdom through Scripture. Sikhism and Christianity both seem to consider sharing wisdom a natural expression of their religious life. It is thus appropriate to acknowledge important differences in nuance between the papers. These differences may stem from differing understandings of wisdom and consequently of the possibility of sharing wisdom it. My own synthesis is mindful of these differences, even as it seeks to uncover the deeper commonalities that I see emerging from the multiple voices.

A word is in order regarding "Sharing Wisdom." How is "Sharing Wisdom" similar to or different from interreligious dialogue and collaboration? What is the uniqueness of our emphasis upon "Sharing Wisdom?" My own answer would be that sharing wisdom is the heart of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue as practiced often brings members of different faith communities together in a show of similarity, or even of difference, that highlights the goodwill and desire for harmony and positive contribution to society that are the driving force behind coming together in the first instance. All too often, the coming together lacks reflectivity and does not draw in meaningful ways from the wellsprings of the traditions themselves. Without detracting from the social and political significance of such coming together, from the religious perspective it is found lacking inasmuch as it does not engage the religious traditions deeply in their own language. One expression of this lack is the double talk and the discrepancy found between statements made to members of one's own faith community and statements made when facing outwards. Meaningful engagement with the religious other is at the same time also an opportunity for deeper engagement with oneself. It is here that we enter wisdom's domain.

Such a twofold movement can take various forms. The engagement with the other could be a means for stimulating self-critical reflection¹ or a clearer, perhaps novel, articulation of

¹Indeed, some of the papers in the present project indicate how in the process of sharing wisdom one is also opened up to self criticism. See Volf, p. 18; Gianotti, p. 14 and elsewhere.

one's own tradition.² It could help remind us of an overlooked or forgotten part of our own tradition. It could stimulate us to discover new resources within our traditions to match up to ideals that our tradition had not previously entertained.³ And it could simply make us more profoundly aware of humanity, in its diversity, expressed in the broad range of religious experience, both similar and different, that we encounter as we encounter practitioners of other religions. However we conceive of the deeper benefits of interreligious engagement, all these aspects point to the wisdom of traditions and rely upon them. All these aspects are also transformative. They lead to a transformation of our vision of ourselves and the other. Such transformation is only possible when wisdom has touched us and we are called to reconsider our view of ourselves and the other in its light. Thus, interreligious dialogue that does not lead to genuine transformation of some kind lacks the touch of wisdom. Sharing wisdom is by its nature transformative.

But wisdom need not be limited to the sharing of ideas and the growth of understanding. Wisdom is also a call to action. As Pal Ahluwalia makes clear in the case of Sikhism, practice and service are two keys to the acquisition and expression of wisdom.⁴ As Miroslav Volf suggests, wisdom is a reality that seeks expression.⁵ Its expression is in the minds and hearts of those who make a dwelling place for it. But it is also in the action that manifests wisdom and that seeks to make the entire world wisdom's arena of manifestation. Hence, wisdom is a potent driver for common action. Our papers bring some potent examples of the call to action growing from the inspiration of sharing wisdom. Thus, Sallie King mentions several instances in which Buddhist teachers were inspired by the wisdom teachings of Christianity to social action as an expression of their Buddhist identity.⁶ Similarly Anant Rambachan finds

²For an example of transformed self understanding, see Sallie King's reference to Masao Abe's changed self-understanding in light of his dialogue with Christianity (note 4).

³ One example, in the case of Judaism, is how the message of non-violence made its way from Jainism, through the teachings of Gandhi, into various attempts to locate this teaching within the fundamentally martial tradition of Judaism. Both the Buddhist and Hindu papers consider greater social awareness and engagement to be fruits of their tradition's exchange with other traditions. See Rambachan, p. 14; King, p. 5 ff.

⁴Ahluwalia, pp. 5-6.

⁵Volf, p. 7.

⁶King, p. 20.

inspiration in both Christian and Buddhist resources, as he reflects upon how to draw Hinduism's own wisdom from the theoretical plane to the level of social reality.⁷

Sharing Wisdom - Between the Universal and the Particular

As Miroslav Volf astutely points out, sharing wisdom assumes similarity as well as dissimilarity.⁸ It assumes a single humanity living in one world. At the same time, this single humanity is differentiated, and it is this diversity that creates the specific need for sharing wisdom. Diversity is not total otherness. It is because we are both alike and different that we seek to share wisdom across religious dividing lines. Thus, the sharing of wisdom is a bridge between two fundamental dimensions that characterize all our religions - the universal and the particular. For wisdom to be recognized as such it must have an appeal beyond the teachings of a particular tradition. Wisdom is by its essence, as well as following historical precedent, a universal phenomenon.⁹ And yet, each tradition, and consequently its wisdom, is couched within a particularity, be it national, cultural, sociological or other. It is worth acknowledging that even while affirming a single world and a single humanity, one can conceive of multiple wisdoms. Thus, in the case of Islam, while humanity is one, its constituents are many, and each is entrusted with a different aspect of wisdom, along with the command to learn from one another.¹⁰ Sharing is thus constructing a bridge between the universal and the particular.

7P. 15. It is worth noting that the call for common action that emerges from Meir Sendor's discussion, p. 18, based upon the teachings of R. Soloveitchik, sidesteps the wisdom of traditions, and focuses on common action as the sole area of mutual engagement. If "Sharing Wisdom" is taken seriously, one might suggest there is a qualitative difference between such collaboration and the effects of sharing wisdom as these are expressed in action, as in the cases of Hinduism and Buddhism, just quoted. Common action that is not inspired by wisdom is not transformative in the same way. It may address a social ill, but it does not, in the process, transform religious understanding in a meaningful way. True sharing of wisdom would seem to always be transformative.

⁸Volf, p. 5 ff.

⁹The universality of wisdom is a hallmark of biblical wisdom, that draws upon a universal wisdom tradition, common to the entire ancient near east. Hellenistic philosophy provides a later universal form of wisdom that serves as a backdrop for various articulations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as the papers of our think tank indicate.

¹⁰See Gianotti, pp. 14-15.

It is worth noting that both the unity of the world and the unity of mankind are highlighted in all our papers. In fact it is this unity of the world and the unity of humanity that provide the impetus for sharing wisdom, for some of our authors.¹¹

Wisdom can help us navigate the tension between the particular and the universal as we consider the relationship of wisdom and God. It is very helpful to note, in this context, the Muslim position, according to which God's wisdom, which emanates from the "mother book", far exceeds his revelation.¹² We actually find similar statements in Rabbinic literature, according to which the Torah is but a pale reflection of the supernal wisdom.¹³ True wisdom is thus, as the Sikhs teach us, the attainment of the divine and its attributes.¹⁴ While it goes without saying that such a formulation remains beyond the pale of what a Buddhist could subscribe to, this formulation could serve as a common denominator for all theistic traditions, offering us the ultimate yardstick by means of which to measure traditions, their evolution and the degree to which they are effective carriers of true wisdom. True wisdom always points beyond the particular form of religious expression to the ultimate source of all religious traditions - God Himself. Thus, to speak of wisdom, and more specifically of divine wisdom, provides us with a way of bridging the universal and the particular. Wisdom is that which is universal and which manifests in the particular. It is that which prevents our individual traditions from closing in on themselves and keeps them open to the broader divine vision, the wisdom that both precedes religions and is grounded in them.¹⁵

¹¹Volf, p. 7. This unity is also the key to finding wisdom in traditions outside Christianity, inasmuch as all things exist in Christ, and hence in Wisdom. See Volf, p. 16. See also Rambachan, p. 2; Ahluwalia, p. 10 ff; Sendor, p. 20. It is noteworthy that Sendor draws the ethical consequences of God's unity in relation to the other in terms of love and forgiveness, but is not explicit about the implications for sharing wisdom. It is this very sense of unity that informs some of the other presentations, leading them to recognize how vital sharing wisdom is and how it is metaphysically grounded. In theory, a Jewish presentation of the theme could have proceeded along similar lines. Sendor's care for integrity and identity, to be discussed below, led him to downplay the idea and its consequences. It is thus significant that despite the more protective strategy his paper takes, he too articulates the basis of metaphysical unity.

¹²Gianotti, p. 11.

¹³See Genesis Rabba 17,5. Sendor does not discuss directly the question of God and wisdom, because of the specific focus and concern of his paper. Therefore, this dimension, which is present in all the other essays, with the obvious exception of Buddhism, is absent in his presentation. It is, nevertheless, an important aspect of Jewish reflection on wisdom.

¹⁴See Ahluwalia, pp. 7-8. See also Gianotti, p. 2.

¹⁵Several papers touch upon the relationship of wisdom and truth. See Volf, p.4; Sendor, p. 4; Gianotti, p. 10 and King, p. 1. Often, one considers truth as the arena of clash between competing religious

Several authors have touched upon the relations of sharing wisdom and peacemaking.¹⁶ Sharing wisdom is related to peacemaking in obvious ways. It allows us to remove the misunderstandings that harbor enmity and lead to violent behavior. In light of the attempt to consider wisdom's role as the bridge between the universal and the particular we may gain a deeper insight into the relationship between the sharing of wisdom and making peace. Most situations in which violence is manifest are situations in which the particular rules and sight has been lost of the universal. In the case of religious violence, it is only possible when complete identification with the particular takes place, to the exclusion of recognition of other manifestations of the universal. The quest for wisdom is by definition a quest for the universal and for the dynamic relations between the particular and the universal, within one's own tradition, as well as within other traditions. It is thus a quest that takes us away from complete identification with the particular form of our traditions and into the search for the higher divine wisdom and purpose. The movement towards the universal is a movement towards peace. Seeking wisdom is, ultimately, seeking peace.

A different way of stating the same thing would be to consider the tension, or movement, between human wisdom and divine wisdom. For most of our traditions, true wisdom is, to varying degrees, divine wisdom.

Yet, our traditions are full of the activities of sages. Some of these sages consciously seek divine wisdom, others don't, even as some of our traditions can speak of wisdom without associating it with the divine. An examination of the papers shows that while some of our authors focused upon divine wisdom, others approached wisdom in relation to human sages.¹⁷ I believe it is fair to say that each of our traditions has forms or precedents that highlight the human component of wisdom and those that seek the divine, or the metaphysical reality as it is

worldviews. However, reframing truth in terms of wisdom and the recognition that wisdom itself is multi-dimensional could help in mitigating the potential clash of competing truth claims. To the degree these draw upon a prior, or broader, notion of wisdom and to the extent that some of the dimensions of wisdom provide a spiritual meeting high-ground, wisdom can be used as a way of diffusing competition. The dual insights, concerning wisdom's relation to God and concerning wisdom's place in creation, would cover all religions and their teachings, and allow us to make wisdom, in its divine or cosmic sense, the goal of our quest, rather than truth, conceived exclusively in terms of a particular community, revelation or path.

¹⁶See King, p. 4. The idea is also implicit in Sendor, p. 11 and Volf, pp. 8-9.

¹⁷Notable in this respect are Sendor's treatment of wisdom in Judaism that very much highlights human wisdom, in relation to divine revelation, and King, whose metaphysics preclude the identification of wisdom and the divine. Wisdom is thus the process of attaining the appropriate or best understanding of reality and drawing the appropriate conclusions.

in and of itself. Wisdom is thus elusive. It is both the primary reality, manifesting itself through the human reality,¹⁸ and that human reality itself. This tension around the question of who is the actor, or whose wisdom is made manifest, is what situates wisdom between the universal and the particular. Timothy Gianotti and Pal Ahluwalia both point to the relation between wisdom and other divine attributes.¹⁹ Attributes are what humans share with the divine. Attributes can thus be variously manifested as more or less human, more or less divine. Wisdom is thus the common bridge between the human and the divine, the particular and the universal.

Wisdom can, accordingly, also be the goal of the common quest that unites practitioners of different religions. Timothy Gianotti has suggested that rather than thinking of ourselves as sharing “our” wisdom with others, we should conceive of ourselves as engaged in the common quest for wisdom.²⁰ The realization that wisdom provides the bridge from the human to the divine and from the particular to the universal makes this formulation particularly appealing. As we are all placed upon the axis between the human and the divine, or that of moving from human limitations to transcending them, the quest for wisdom is a common human quest. Gianotti’s call simply articulates a reality that we have all been living for thousands of years. We have all been seeking wisdom ever since our religions have come into being. Now, suggests Gianotti, is the time for us to do so together.

Situating wisdom between the universal and the particular allows us to explore different forms of sharing wisdom and their respective benefits. Within wisdom’s range, what aspect do we seek to share? Is sharing an attempt to uncover the common, universal core, that may underlie all traditions, or is it the attempt to share the unique, particular, perhaps even strange? Is the wisdom that can be seen by others as folly,²¹ also part of the wisdom we seek to share, or should the sharing of wisdom be limited to those forms of wisdom already recognized as such by practitioners of other faiths.

There are, of course, no hard and fast answers to these questions. The importance we attach to the sharing of wisdom will determine what aspects of our tradition come under the

¹⁸See Volf, p. 14.

¹⁹See Gianotti, p. 2 ff.; Ahluwalia, p. 8.

²⁰Gianotti, p. 19.

²¹See Volf, p. 13.

mandate of sharing. It would seem, however, that if we seek to understand humanity in its fullness, nothing should be excluded from the purview of wisdom. Differences will remain. Sharing wisdom, as I understand it, is not a mechanism for obliterating differences. Honest sharing could, however, allow us to discover the depth of humanity, even as it finds expression in that which is different, in the depth of the particular.

From another perspective, sharing wisdom is particularly vital in relation to our differences, rather than our commonalities. If we highlight only commonalities, then we are not really learning about the other. We are simply uncovering the common ground that we already recognize. In other words, we recognize the other as a form of ourselves. Sharing otherness allows us to recognize multiple expressions of wisdom, even as they assume expressions that are foreign to us. We may choose to do so because we seek a fuller understanding of humanity or because we are open to a broader understanding of what might constitute wisdom. In this context it is worth recalling the observation by Anant Rambachan that meaningful sharing is founded upon the recognition that another tradition can be genuinely enriching.²² Such recognition is already a form of recognizing some aspect of validity within that tradition. Sharing thus emerges as a strategy for recognition. It may, quite possibly, also be the pedagogy, by means of which we educate others to the acceptance and recognition of other traditions.

It is important to pay careful attention to the various strategies by means of which the teaching of the other is legitimated in terms of wisdom. The easiest, and most comprehensive, strategy is the apophatic strategy, used by Rambachan and Ahluwalia. According to this strategy, all our speech, thought and understanding of God are limited, inferior and unable to capture the divine in and of itself. The response to the limitations of our understanding is the recognition of how partial is the teaching of all traditions, in face of the absolute.²³ This could, in theory, lead to a dismissal of all attempts to articulate religious understanding as invalid or as of limited significance, and hence undeserving of our attention.²⁴ In Rambachan's hands, voicing the Hindu tradition, this creates an openness to all traditions as potential carriers of

²²Rambachan, p. 12. See also Ahluwalia, p. 9. Sikhi's religious pluralism is thus of a piece with its understanding of divine wisdom. This is the same understanding articulated in Rambachan's presentation of Hinduism.

²³See Rambachan, p. 4.

²⁴Some Jewish theories of revelation have resorted to just such a tactic to highlight the superiority of revelation to the partial and imperfect spiritual understanding born of the human attempt to grasp the divine. R. Yehuda Halevy's views in his *Kuzari*, are famous, in this regard.

valid insight concerning the divine. Rambachan goes as far as to suggest that this key insight can be exported from Hinduism to other traditions.²⁵ A different way of putting this might be that an apophatic strain may be found in every tradition. All that remains is for us to engage in a reflection on the meaning of “negative theology”, as it is often called, to interreligious relations.

While this is a powerful strategy for recognizing the other and opening up to the wisdom of another tradition, we also encounter in our essays strategies based on the positive action of God, rather than the negative limitations of human understanding. These strategies may be presented as different forms of the gift theory. According to this theory, wisdom is the gift of God, and he has given it in various contexts. These contexts are broader than the boundaries of individual religious traditions and this allows members of those individual traditions to recognize wisdom beyond their own tradition.²⁶ The Muslim understanding according to which God’s signs are everywhere and that God has given each community something valuable to share with the other is a form of such a theory.²⁷ Rav Kook’s theory of the spreading of aptitudes among the nations, leading to symbiotic and peaceful relations is another form of a gift theory.²⁸

Both the gift theory and the apophatic approach²⁹ address the intricacies of the relations of the universal and the particular. Both attempt to account for the particular in light of the universal and to legitimate difference and particularity. Wisdom is clearly universal and as such is captured in some way by all our traditions. But it is also particular and as such invites us to

²⁵P. 13.

²⁶A further extension of the gift theory informs Miroslav Volf’s presentation. Wisdom is not only God’s gift to us. Gift making is also what we do when we share wisdom with one another.

²⁷See Gianotti, p. 11 ff.

²⁸See Sendor, p. 9 ff. While King does not articulate a theoretical basis for the willingness of Buddhists to learn from others (see p. 5 ff.), the fact could be accounted for on the basis of a gift theory, provided we consider the gift to be a sharing of aptitudes within the human family, without placing the accent on the prior divine distribution of those gifts.

²⁹In reading the papers, one wonders to what extent the Eastern traditions tend more readily to an apophatic approach, and draw its relativising consequences in relation to all religious systems, while the revelation based Abrahamic faiths will feel more comfortable with some kind of gift based understanding of revelation and wisdom. Full apophaticism would undermine the revelational basis of their religions. As a consequence of this difference, the revelation based traditions struggle to articulate a meaningful distinction between the essence of wisdom, which is seen to be internal and derives from revelation, and that which can be received from the outside. See Volf, pp. 17-18; Sendor’s note on the text on p. 10. It is worth nothing that even though Islam is constructed on similar theological premises as Judaism, Gianotti’s presentation highlights equality in the sharing of wisdom, rather than a core wisdom that selectively receives aspects of other wisdoms. See Gianotti, p. 15. This could, of course, simply be a matter of emphasis.

the sharing of that wisdom in its very particularity. That particularity may be validated in terms of the human reality and our need to come to understand it, in the interests of peace. But it may also be validated in terms of the divine reality, as it expresses itself in and through the particular. Here we open up to the possibility that sharing wisdom, in its particularity, is a sharing of divine wisdom, or at the very least, an expression of a common quest for divine wisdom, that cuts across religious traditions.

The Concern for Authenticity and Integrity

While sharing wisdom holds much promise, it is also a project that must be approached with care. Approached with care, it can yield meaningful and transformative fruit for religions and for society. Lacking the needed caution, it can have undesired effects. In considering the concerns that this project raises, one may sum them up in terms of authenticity and integrity. Sharing wisdom must respect the integrity of the overall structure from which the wisdom is shared, as it is extracted and offered in a new context, a new translation. As wisdom is shared in today's world, it often takes pieces of advice out of their context, thereby losing the integrity of the whole, of the totality that is itself a sign and an expression of wisdom. To the extent that sharing wisdom is a means of offering life support when systems of meaning collapse, perhaps we need not be unduly concerned with the purity of the teaching and its integrity. When we face the individual in crisis we seek to heal that individual, and any medicine that comes to hand may be used. But sharing wisdom is more than offering the first available remedy to a person in distress. Sharing wisdom is also a strategy for bringing communities together, for addressing global ills and for growth and transformation of individuals as well as broader religious systems. It is here that greater care must be applied. Miroslav Volf has spelled out some of the problems with extracting pieces of wisdom, nuggets of wisdom as he calls them, from their context and inserting them into new structures of meaning.³⁰ Totality and wholeness are essential to the wisdom of the way of life that religion offers. Striking at that very totality is a way of undermining the integrity, hence the wisdom, of the specific religious way. This is a struggle that all our religions face. On the one hand we are always on the lookout for new ways in which to offer our teachings to our audiences, both old and new. On the other hand, the new forms of teaching must respect the coherence of the totality of the way of life. This is a struggle

³⁰Volf, pp. 12-13.

already within each of our religions. Sharing wisdom between members of different religions heightens the tensions further.

These issues are particularly relevant to the cause of wisdom because, as Anant Rambachan makes us aware, wisdom is itself founded upon integration. Wisdom is an integrated mode of being.³¹ While the details of how such integration is conceived of may change from religion to religion, I believe it is fair to say that all our traditions would establish a close relationship between wisdom and integration - the integration of heart and mind, thought and action, individual and community, body and spirit. What threatens our traditions, as the work of the earlier think tank on "The Crisis of the Holy" has suggested, is the breakdown of this integrity and the loss of comprehensiveness of meaning that religion seeks to offer. The wisdom of religious traditions is appreciated precisely as a testimony to the wholeness of life. The sharing of wisdom must thus find the middle path between the desire to extend wisdom beyond its original home and the need to preserve that very sense of wholeness and integrity that allow us to recognize it as wisdom in the first instance.

The issue arises, to a large extent, because the context for sharing wisdom has changed. Rambachan has highlighted the classical context of teacher-disciple relations within which the sharing of wisdom has classically taken place.³² The point has come up in just about all the papers in one way or another. Today the imparting of wisdom takes place in a much broader context, both within each religion and beyond it. This new context also offers new ways of conceiving or reconfiguring the meaning of totality. Timothy Gianotti suggests that outside of the teacher-student paradigm and in the context of the sharing of wisdom between religions we ought to think of how wisdom is mutually sought, pondered and cherished by believers of multiple faith traditions.³³ Their sincerity and the unifying intention of seeking with open minds and hearts provide an alternative to the integrity of the original context of acquiring wisdom. Thus, the common quest is, for Gianotti, a new context that almost redefines the meaning of integrity and authenticity. Purity of mind and heart are what protect the common quest from some of the pitfalls that contemporary sharing of wisdom suffers from. Thus, integrity is reconstituted.

³¹Rambachan, p. 2.

³²Rambachan, p. 7.

³³Gianotti, p. 19.

A second meaningful insight comes up in several of the papers. Sallie King mentions what an example Gandhi was for the Dalai Lama.³⁴ Rambachan offers us a theory, supported with some moving quotes from Vivekananda, of how inspiration and example can and should be carried over beyond the boundaries of traditions.³⁵ The example of the individual teacher or saint remains a powerful means of educating and hence of sharing wisdom. Even if traditional teacher-student relations have undergone transformation, and perhaps even broken down, the power of personal example as a source of inspiration endures. And it endures in a world in which that personal example radiates to ever broader circles, reaching beyond the limits of the spiritual tradition that provided the inspiration for the personal example. Personal example and the enactment of wisdom in concrete life situations may be even more powerful in a media-conscious culture that amplifies the individual person and the individual deed, elevating them in public consciousness. Thus, sharing wisdom is achieved through the lived teaching of the individual, the example of the believer, the practitioner, the teacher, the saint.

In this context it is worth reflecting upon the challenges of sharing wisdom as they are shared with a body of world religious leaders. The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, are leaders, seeking to navigate their traditions in today's society. In a meaningful way not only their faith communities but also those of other communities, the world at large, look to them as models for wisdom in action, offering their testimony and example to the world at large. Perhaps one significant way of sharing wisdom in the context of bringing together religious leaders to engage this topic is the raising of awareness of how global the need is for role models and personal examples of lived wisdom. As religious leaders come together to ponder this topic they are thus invited to think of the way their personal example can inspire not only members of their own community, but the seekers and faithful of other communities. The challenge of religious leadership today extends beyond the classical confines of our tradition, just as the spreading of wisdom extends beyond the parameters of teacher-student relations. One of the new forms of the quest for wisdom may be the invitation to the repositories of the wisdom of the world's religions to offer a testimony, individually and collectively, that radiates far beyond the range of where their wisdom reached in earlier times.

³⁴King, p. 9.

³⁵See in particular Rambachan, p. 9.

The problem of authenticity has other significant expressions as well. These are highlighted in the clearest way in the presentation of the Jewish view of sharing wisdom. The concern for authenticity informs Sendor's entire presentation. Protection of the authentic teaching and approach to the divine constitutes the core narrative of Judaism's sharing wisdom with other religions. The more one emphasizes teaching, a natural by-product of revelation and the Scriptures that are born of it, the more the concern for authenticity increases. Sendor is accordingly concerned about inauthentic syncretism and generalization and the obscuring of important distinctions between the faiths.³⁶ We note the choice of "inauthentic" to designate erroneous teaching or understanding. Misunderstanding is perhaps the greatest enemy and while the drive for sharing is upheld, Sendor provides us with a battery of precautions, all of which are meant to safeguard the authenticity of teaching.

The process of sharing wisdom must confront fundamental obstacles. There is, however, a great distance between the fundamental obstacles to sharing wisdom, based on the difficulty in communicating experience properly, that Sallie King highlights³⁷ and the problems of boundaries and their appropriate maintenance, as teaching is protected from misunderstanding. Different as these issues are, and different as their practical consequences in relation to actual sharing of wisdom are,³⁸ there is one key issue that is common to them. Both express the concern for authenticity. And contemporary society only heightens the tension around authenticity, as the different traditions battle to preserve the integrity of their tradition in the face of multiple external forces.³⁹

Discussion of authenticity leads us to consider its relationship to identity. Loss of identity is the biggest fear that sharing wisdom could trigger.⁴⁰ Receiving too much from the outside could feel like an unwelcome undoing of one's very self. The history of Jewish wisdom sharing,

³⁶Sendor, p. 15.

³⁷See King, p. 1.

³⁸King's and Sendor's presentations are, as already suggested, diametrically opposed as far as the basic attitude to the sharing of wisdom between traditions goes. Contrast the ease of taking and giving teachings from and to other religions in King's essay with the efforts to protect from any possible misunderstanding in Sendor's. While the differences express deep differences in cultural attitude, they also stem from different definitions of what wisdom is. Starting from experience and starting from the historical content of revelation will yield very different approaches to how wisdom is managed.

³⁹See King, p. 17.

⁴⁰See Volf, p. 13.

as told by Sender, provides an example of the concern and the struggle for maintaining the sense of self.⁴¹ Perhaps it is no accident that Buddhism approaches the problem with so much ease, and perhaps its openness to multiple religious identities is itself related to a lesser concern with maintaining the integrity and identity of the self, given its own approach to issues of self and identity.

However, as vital as the protection of tradition is, we must also consider that none of our traditions exist in a pure state, and that they are all contaminated by the original sin of sharing wisdom. We all enter the quest for preserving the integrity of our religious identity after already having been touched in some way by the other, and having been already transformed by that touch.⁴² The way in which Judaism, Christianity and Islam were all transformed through the encounter with each other and with Hellenistic Philosophy is an important instance of sharing wisdom that touches the heart of the religion. One hears Sender's struggles as he seeks to situate the authentic Jewish understanding of God, viewed through the various stages of its articulation in the history of Jewish thought.⁴³ But maybe that is something we must give further thought to - is it possible, hundreds and thousands of years later, to speak of a religious tradition in its pure form. The quest for authenticity carries with it dangers. These are manifest in some of the reactionary religious forms that are born of the attempt to recreate a lost authenticity. In a more philosophical vein, there is the danger of undoing the movement of growth a tradition has undergone, a growth which may itself be part of the divine design for its evolution. At the same time, letting go of the quest for authenticity is tantamount to deep betrayal of our own commitment to tradition.

We are thus pulled towards an equilibrium that is hard to articulate. It is an equilibrium that recognizes change, transformation and above all the influence that comes from sharing on the one hand, while upholding a sense of identity, commitment and authenticity, on the other. The dynamics of this equilibrium may be hard to describe, especially as they vary from one tradition to the other and from one historical manifestation to another. It is this very equilibrium that allows us to engage in sharing wisdom while at the same time maintaining our sense of religious authenticity and identity. It is this equilibrium that allows us to uphold the age old

41Sender, p. 12.

42See Volf, pp. 15-16; Sender, p. 12 ff.; King, p. 6 ff.

43Sender, pp. 19-20.

teachings of our tradition even as we seek new ways to give them expression. The difficulty is that an equilibrium is not a fixed set of rules. It is an internal guide, a spiritual code, in a word - a particular expression of wisdom. And it is as elusive as wisdom itself. Different people, different religions and different streams within them, may grasp this equilibrium differently. It remains a source of contention, even of conflict. And yet, it also carries with it the traces of the wisdom that could allow us to recognize when the balance of authenticity and growth is appropriate and when it is not.

A suggestive idea comes to mind. Our different traditions, while all partaking of the primordial sin of sharing wisdom, offer different theories in relation to the sharing of wisdom. When viewed in their entirety could they not suggest an equilibrium that is worthy of consideration? As we focus our attention on the dynamics of identity, change and influence as expressed within the totality of our traditions, we recognize the same forces we encounter, in most cases, within the individual traditions. Accordingly, there is wisdom in noting our differences, because they are complementary and they could provide the elements of the full equilibrium required for appropriate sharing of wisdom between religious traditions. It is important to hear the Buddhist voice encouraging borrowing of techniques and respecting multiple religious identities even as it is important to hear the Jewish voice that calls for care and concern, lest error settles into the teaching of our religions. It is important to note how the dynamics of acculturation and translation have affected Christianity, even as we note that Hindu teaching, as well as Sikh teaching, continue to draw on classical master-disciple relations and the demands of discipline and the spiritual life that accompany them. Sharing the wisdom of how we share wisdom may provide us with the wisdom to share wisdom. That is: each of our traditions, as expressed in our papers, emphasizes a different aspect of a complex dynamic in relation to sharing wisdom. The complexity of wisdom leads us to recognize the need for integrating some aspect of each of these approaches. We thus need to learn from the other how they share wisdom, what their dynamics and concerns are. This opens for us a window to a better understanding what wisdom is, and enriches how we seek and disseminate wisdom. The combined wisdom of our traditions may present an equilibrium that is itself an expression of the higher wisdom, in which all our traditions are rooted.

Sharing Wisdom and Mission

A discussion of authenticity leads us to a consideration of the relationship of sharing wisdom and missionary activity. Sharing wisdom could be viewed with suspicion as a strategy for proselytization. The strong impetus that exists in some of our religions to share their wisdom, truth and faith with others raises the need to distinguish between sharing wisdom and missionizing. I would like to suggest that fuller awareness of the conditions for appropriate sharing could actually provide a direction in handling the thorny issue of conversion and mission.

Sharing wisdom is founded upon reciprocity. Even if it does not assume full equality and does not partake of a relativistic view of religious teaching in relation to the ultimate truth, it nevertheless does assume the possibility of meaningful sharing in a reciprocal movement, which is based on some degree of mutual recognition. In this sense, sharing wisdom is opposed to missionary activity that usually ignores the inherent value of the other, or trivializes it to the point of attempting to supplant it by means of an alternative religious identity. The attitude of responsible sharing of wisdom thus provides an alternative, and hence a way of addressing an issue that causes great concern in India, in the Jewish community and elsewhere. Sharing wisdom opens us up to a broader range of understandings of both what wisdom is and how to share it wisely. When more than one view of these issues is acknowledged, we will have broken beyond the narrower view of inter-group relations, associated with efforts at proselytization.

The recognition that all religions have something important to say to the human person does not preclude the possibility that the appeal of wisdom might lead a person to adopt a new way of religious life. However, the process leading up to such a decision would be completely different. It would be based on the recognition of multiple wisdom traditions, rather than one that overrides all others. It would be based on offering testimony and witness, rather than any of a number of coercive and disrespectful methods that are often employed in missionary activities.⁴⁴ Perhaps most importantly, true sharing of wisdom is not associated with ego and considerations of personal and group identity that often accompany proselytization. As Volf points out, wisdom is the primary reality, and it seeks to impart itself.⁴⁵ Letting wisdom impart itself leads to the removal of the individual ego. In true sharing of wisdom it is wisdom that is active, not the excited believer.

⁴⁴On the importance of witness, see Volf, p. 10 ff. and Rambachan, p. 12.

⁴⁵Volf, p. 7.

The Commercialization of Wisdom

The present project was born, so to speak, in response to a challenge posed by one of the members of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders. Sri Sri Ravi Sankar made a statement at a conference jointly attended, in which he posed the following question: "If we can share each other's food, listen to each other's music, and wear each other's clothes, why can we not share each other's wisdom?" This rhetorical question was followed by a call to scholars of different religions to reflect upon the boundaries and strategies for appropriate sharing of wisdom between religious traditions. This topic goes to the heart of Elijah's work and therefore members of Elijah's academic steering committee responded positively to the suggestion to make this the subject of deeper reflection at the Elijah Interfaith Academy. Underlying Sri Sri's question is a marketplace reality in which goods travel and are exchanged and in which wisdom itself is commodified and shared. This reality, much like globalization itself, has positive as well as negative aspects. Its positive aspects are the accessibility of knowledge and the ease of its dissemination. These allow for an open ended invitation to share wisdom, as part of a process of spiritual growth, that all religions can jointly contribute to.

But inspiring as this vision may be, there is also a flip side to it. The wisdom of our traditions is a wisdom of wholeness. This wholeness can not be adequately expressed in the marketplace. The very process of commodification of wisdom alters something fundamental about it, as it extracts it from its context of wholeness. The problem of "nuggetization" that our papers deal with grapples with this issue: how to relate to the nuggets of wisdom taken out of the totality of tradition and shared with others, mainly in a commercial or semi-commercial context. Resisting the commodification and commercialization of wisdom seem to be one of the strongest points of agreement between scholars involved in the present project.⁴⁶ The identification of wisdom with God is Gianotti's way of ensuring that wisdom is not commodified.⁴⁷ This would mean that the quest for wisdom must remain mindful of that aspect of transcendent wisdom that is God Himself that continues to inform the wisdom we are able to attain, and that always remains beyond it. Sendor reminds us that the matrix of student-master

⁴⁶For examples from the Buddhist context, see King, p. 17.

⁴⁷Gianotti, p. 18.

relationships is designed to offer protection against the commodification of wisdom.⁴⁸ Miroslav Volf states clearly that wisdom is betrayed when it is bought and sold.⁴⁹ The commodification and commercialization of wisdom place a score of temptations on the path of the seeker of wisdom. These include tailoring wisdom to the desire of its potential buyers, the distortion of wisdom and the possibility of taking advantage of the potential seeker. Commercialization allows the buyer to pick and chose as much or as little of the wisdom as suits them. Wisdom then no longer shapes people's lives, but simply satisfies a desire, or at best, addresses a human crisis situation. Thus, the commercialization of wisdom runs the risk of wisdom no longer being the primary reality. Instead, the individual endowed with buying power becomes primary.

It is not simply that those who hold wisdom dear must resist its commercialization. Wisdom could actually provide an antidote to globalizing tendencies that shape our consciousness in commercial terms. All religious communities are under the assault of these tendencies. Some of the violent reactions within specific religious traditions are, at least in part, a reaction to these globalizing tendencies, that are seen as secular and catering to the personal satisfaction of the individual. Wisdom offers a response to these tendencies. It invites us to transcend ourselves in seeking a higher coherence and wholeness. One concrete way of transcending our selves and our communities in the quest for wisdom informs this project - the sharing of wisdom between different religious traditions.

Sharing Wisdom and Power Relations

Both proselytization and commercialization involve us in some way in power relations. It is therefore wise to consider the fact that sharing wisdom does not always happen on a neutral playing ground, in which all parties are equally empowered. Whereas the ideal precondition for healthy sharing of wisdom would be the reciprocal sharing of wisdom by parties that enjoy full parity with one another, the reality is often different. This is, Gianotti reminds us, why interfaith

⁴⁸Sendor, p. 15.

⁴⁹Volf pp. 10-11.

relations are often suspect.⁵⁰ The fear that this is one additional expression of imbalances in the distribution of power and wealth cannot be overlooked, as we reflect upon the challenges facing a healthy sharing of wisdom.

The mechanism of receiving and giving wisdom is also affected by how an individual community is situated in the matrix of power relations in relation to broader society. Meir Sendor's presentation makes that point clearly.⁵¹ Being a minority within a host culture conditions the processes of sharing wisdom in Jewish history. One may argue that the sharing of wisdom can never be fully separated from issues of power relations in the political and social order. At the same time, the sharing of wisdom could create an alternative reality that could provide a corrective to power imbalances in the "real" world. When properly executed, the sharing of wisdom is founded upon mutual recognition, meeting at least the minimum requirement of recognizing that the other has something of worth to teach one. Thus, sharing wisdom is related to recognition, which, in turn is related to power relations. In a meaningful way the field of wisdom can make up for conditions prevailing in the social and political order. At the same time, it can never be fully divorced from that order.

What all this means is that awareness and sensitivity are required as we share wisdom. The sharing of wisdom can be a strategy for addressing some of the world's burning issues. But it can only be effective if those very issues are born in mind. Awareness to imbalances in power relations must accompany our exchange of wisdom. Only then can the exchange of wisdom help address those very imbalances.

Humility and the Sharing of Wisdom

In seeking to identify the points of commonality that emerge from the different presentations, one is struck by how humility features in the different presentations as a precondition for sharing wisdom. Despite differences in metaphysics, when it comes to the field of ethics and spirituality, all traditions seem to recognize the importance of humility. Several of the authors have referred to epistemological humility.⁵² The ultimate wisdom cannot be known

⁵⁰Gianotti, pp. 17-18.

⁵¹Sendor, p. 12 ff.

⁵²This is particularly true of the Eastern traditions.

and always remains beyond our grasp. Hence, the attitude to all other traditions must be informed by the humility that is born of our recognition of our own limitations. There are various consequences to this epistemological humility. As wisdom cannot be stated adequately anyway, this allowed the Buddha to adjust his teachings in relation to the capacity of his audience to understand him.⁵³ Thus, accommodation of the teaching may be the consequence of humility. The limitations of language and understanding also provide the roots for acceptance of the other. Thus, epistemological humility provides a basis for interreligious pluralism.⁵⁴

Despite the appeal of the argument from epistemological humility, we may do well do extract humility from its philosophical implications and to concentrate upon its spiritual virtues and its contribution to interpersonal and intergroup relations. As noted already, while all traditions have an apophatic dimension, there is something unsettling in constructing bridges of understanding between people on the foundation of lack of full or sufficient understanding of God. Even if it is true, it is counterintuitive to traditions whose starting point is the positive knowledge offered by revelation. The argument should actually run that the fuller the knowledge of God, the greater the humility. Knowledge is a part of the complex of attributes that the seeker perfects, as he or she draws closer to God and grows to increasingly resemble Him.⁵⁵ Thus, as God supports, sustains and accepts all in His humility, so ought those who grow closer to him. Closeness to God should result in a fuller vision of the divine economy, in which there is room for all.⁵⁶ Humility could thus be marshaled as a spiritual and moral virtue leading to making room for others, rather than as the point at which human understanding reaches its inevitable limits, forcing us to accept all others, as a consequence of human limitation.

Closely related to humility is the overcoming of the ego in the process of acquiring wisdom. Ahluwalia has made explicit a spiritual fact found in all our traditions.⁵⁷ Ego is the greatest obstacle to gaining wisdom. Now, this is a fact that all traditions uphold. However, it is rare to see a recognition that individual and group ego can easily creep into the relations between groups. Thus, we often encounter the paradox of people who cultivate humility in the

⁵³King, p. 12.

⁵⁴See in Particular Rambachan, p. 13 ff.

⁵⁵See Gianotti, p. 2 ff.

⁵⁶I do not consider it an accident that Judaism's greatest man of God in the 20th century also articulated the beautiful theory of divine economy, making room for all. See Sendor, p. 9 ff.

⁵⁷See Ahluwalia, p. 6 ff.

context of their own tradition, cultivate the very opposite in relation to others. Clearly, genuine humility must extend to all arenas. Overcoming ego and its consequences is thus a fundamental need of the spiritual life and it has real and immediate consequences to the project of sharing wisdom. Not only does sharing wisdom require putting aside the ego in an act of listening to the other and learning from her. Sharing wisdom may even be presented as a kind of spiritual exercise, by means of which one can be taken beyond one's limitations and opened up to a higher wisdom. The opening is as much a consequence of what is learned as the attitudinal change, whereby the ego is placed aside, in the act of genuine listening. Seen in this light, sharing wisdom is not simply a remedy to issues in contemporary society and in particular to inter-group relations. Sharing wisdom can actually be an integral part of a core spiritual process, recognized by all our traditions - overcoming the ego, and the liberation and transformation that ensue.

Love and the Sharing of Wisdom

Humility is not the only spiritual quality that our authors make repeated appeal to.⁵⁸ One also notices the centrality of love to many of the discussions. There is of course a close relationship between love and the overcoming of ego. If wisdom is what takes us beyond our own self involvement, then love would be its natural expression. Unselfishness and wisdom are related, and the recognition of truth is understood as leading to altruism. For the Hindu and Sikh traditions this is because true wisdom is rooted in the recognition of the unity of all being.⁵⁹ The consequences of this recognition are altruism and love of all.

Even without this metaphysical understanding, we can recognize that love, selflessness and compassion are the spiritual high points that our traditions seek to cultivate.⁶⁰ The philosophical, theological and metaphysical reasoning may differ, but the spiritual goal seems closely related - transcending the limitations of the self and growing in love. If Hinduism relies on the fundamental insight of the nature of reality, Christianity relies heavily on the person who

⁵⁸Actually, whatever is said in relation to love could be said in relation to any of the virtues, all of which are interrelated and all of which have to do with wisdom. However, the repeated appeal to love in our essays leads me to lift it up as a key point that all our traditions point to.

⁵⁹Rambachan, p. 16 ff; Ahluwalia, p. 5.

⁶⁰ In relation to Buddhism, see King, p. 13.

is the way and who is love. The details may vary; the fundamental spiritual process seems to be one.

If the movement of the spiritual life is indeed growing from the limitations of the individual to ever broader love, wisdom does indeed have an important role to play in this process. Wisdom paves the way and points our understanding towards the goal. Or from another angle: wisdom is the goal, in light of which our orientation and attitude changes, leading to increased love. And finally: love provides the drive for sharing wisdom. Let us dwell for a moment upon this aspect of their relationship.

Some of our papers state explicitly that the driving force behind the sharing of wisdom is love.⁶¹ Both love of God and love of the other are recognized as driving the process of sharing wisdom. The distribution of wisdom among nations, says Rav Kook, is intended to lead to a loving sharing between them.⁶² Love is the driver for sharing wisdom. Love and wisdom are thus closely related. Wisdom leads to love and love leads to the sharing of wisdom. Seen in the context of transcending ego and self-centeredness, these words take on a completely different meaning than we might ascribe to them otherwise. The love that leads to sharing wisdom must be founded upon transcending the self and its limitations. Herein is the answer and the corrective to much that has gone wrong in the history of sharing wisdom and to many of the pitfalls that we seek to avoid. The test of love is in its selflessness. True love could not bolster individual or group ego. It is a movement of service and care, not of self aggrandizement. By definition it makes room for the other, which in turn opens up the reciprocal movement of sharing wisdom. This is very different from the one sided sharing that has been practiced at times and that remains a threat to effective sharing of wisdom. The key is thus selfless love, making room for the other, but above all making room for wisdom itself to reveal itself. We are at most wisdom's instruments. As we grow in humility and love we become better instruments. As we become finer instruments, we are able to share more fully and with greater purity of intention. As our sharing is purified, wisdom and love increase. In this we all come together.

⁶¹See in particular Volf, p. 6; Ahluwalia, p. 11. See also King, p. 4, expressed in terms of compassion.

⁶²Sendor, pp. 10-11.