

Covenantal Pluralism

"You are my witnesses, says the LORD" (Isa. 43:10). The people of Israel are God's servants called—yes, chosen—to witness to their loving God and the divine plan for humanity and the cosmos. In my usage here, "the people of Israel" refers not to Israelis alone or to Jews only but to all who affirm that God has made a valid covenant with Abraham and his descendants and all who take up the covenantal task of world redemption so the covenant can be fulfilled, for that is the purpose of making the covenant. That is to say, Christians also—and, indeed, Muslims too—are recognized as Abraham's cherished children, at least when they purge themselves of supersessionist claims and hatred of Jews.

To be true to its witness, the people of Israel tell three stories to the world, i.e., the rest of humanity, in the presence of God and in the presence of their fellow human beings. Drawing from their many experiences and traditions, they tell (1) the story of Creation, the divine vision of an intended perfect world; we stake our existence, both as Jews and as Christians, that this world will come to be; (2) the story of covenant, that process operating through a Divine-human partnership whereby our imperfect world will be brought to that state of perfection; and (3) the story of redemption, sometimes called the end of days or the Messiah story, which is the culmination and realization of the process. At the end, as our story goes, holistic perfection will be achieved. There will be peace between humans, between humans and all the rest of life, between all of life and nature itself, and between all of the above and God. To put it another way, these three stories add up to one comprehensive story that I believe is best described as the triumph of life.

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

This master story can be summarized. We (i.e., all living things, sustained and nurtured by God) will fill the world with life. We will reshape the historical reality, the flesh-and-blood world we inhabit, to sustain that life at the highest level. Life will multiply and triumph *quantitatively* over all its enemies, including death and disorder. Life will equally triumph *qualitatively*. All of life's capacities will be developed fully and realized. When life blossoms in its fullest capacity in a world that treats all of life—especially human life, the most developed form—and sustains it with the highest and fullest respect that it deserves, then life will be in harmony with existence and deeply related to God, its source and sustainer. That is our story and our claim.

Telling this story of Creation is our witness. The present facts contradict the narrative fairly substantially. Still, the story of Creation is shared and told, almost as one, by Jews and Christians alike. This story leads humans to see existence—as best we can—from the cosmic perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis*. From that vantage point, what do we see as Jews and Christians? There are three grand movements in the unfolding pattern of this cosmos. First, the world is moving *from chaos to order*, from the moment of the big bang when there was not even a law of nature to the regularity and dependability of the laws of the world we inhabit.

Second, the world is moving *from nonlife to life*. This is the surprising claim of our tradition. Over these billions of years the world has moved from a state in which no life existed to the emergence of life. From that one cell, however many times replicated, life has grown quantitatively and developed qualitatively; it has luxuriated and spread into a vast range of forms over a variety of sustaining conditions. The statement that life is growing and, indeed, that the world is moving from nonlife to life is counterintuitive. How can one account for the ascending current of life when we all encounter death in almost every moment of our lives? We know that all living things die. The answer, of course—the key—is God, the hidden, infinite source of life with limitless goodness, love, and power that sustain life and nurture every possible form of life into being.

This divine source evokes the third grand movement of the cosmos in which we participate. Life is growing ever more to resemble its ground, God. Life moves *from being less to becoming more and more like God*. The highest form of life, the human, represents the high point reached thus far. In human form, life so resembles its Maker that it is called—in the Bible that we share—the “image of God.” This emergence of the image of God is the turning point in cosmic history according to our two faiths. Up to that point, life had been sworn to “be fruitful and multiply” (sociobiologists would call it “maximizing reproductive success”) through a built-in controlling program, a selfish gene, if you will, that drives the process. The image of God's

COVENANTAL PLURALISM

consciousness is so much like God's that humans are able to grasp this overall pattern (of which we ourselves are part) and to join voluntarily in its realization. Similarly, the human image of God has a capacity to love that is so much like God's that humans are able to love all their fellow creatures and every aspect of the universe, as well as the Maker of it all and the beauty of the plan. Once humans understand and embrace this understanding, they will lovingly identify with and willingly participate in the process of perfection; at least that is what our religions believe.

So, God has invited us as humans, the image of God, to enter into a covenantal partnership—a partnership of committed love—to join fully in perfecting the universe, *ikun olam*. The people of Israel joyfully acknowledge, or we should joyfully acknowledge, that God's first covenant, the Noahide covenant—never superseded—is made with all of humanity, not with Jews and not with Christians alone. Indeed, it is made with all sentient beings. All are called to recognize and participate in Creation's patterns, to accept limits, to direct their choices and actions to the side of life. We are called upon to join in working for order against chaos. We are chosen to become part of the process of the movement from nonlife to life. We are commanded to increase life and to make it grow ever more like its Maker. The purpose of the religious way of life is to create the nurturing ambience of memory and experience, of relationships and actions that sustain human growth and turn it toward God.

Being in the image of God brings with it more than godlike capacities. It bestows intrinsic dignity, a climactic extension of that respect to which all of life is entitled.

The people of Israel hold these truths to be self-evident: that all humans are created in the image of God and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable dignities, among which are *infinite value, equality, and uniqueness*, the birthright of every son and every daughter of God.

Now we can offer a fuller definition of the triumph of life, the great theme of the Creation narrative. The world will be filled with life, especially life in the image of God. In order to perfect life qualitatively as well as quantitatively, humans must develop their godlike qualities, to become ever more like God. Consciousness (enabling understanding of the greatest mysteries of the universe), relationship (including love of existence and all existent beings), the power of life and death, and the power to shape chaos into order, will, and freedom—these are God's qualities. We are called to develop the analogous human capacities to their limit. *Imitatio Dei* is the central religious path. Humans are to walk in God's ways by acting and becoming more and more like God. In turn, these capacities are to be used to upgrade the world, particularly to increase its capacity to sustain and

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

nurture life at its highest dignity. A world that was restructured to respect human life's infinite value, human life's fundamental equality, and the uniqueness of every person—such a world would have to be a paradise. Poverty, hunger, oppression, all forms of systematized discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism), all war, sickness, and even death would have to be overcome. Ultimately, these conditions are incompatible with the intrinsic dignities of the image of God, with the infinite value and uniqueness of each person.

The prophetic vision that Jews and Christians share teaches us that in the end the human-Divine partnership will voluntarily and jointly re-create Earth as paradise, as the Garden of Eden that was the originally intended venue for human existence in the bosom of God. A Garden of Eden created—not bestowed by a Father, however generously that Parent may give or play favorites in so doing—becomes the Garden we have created all of us together, which will be shared equally by all human and all living creatures together.

As Jews and Christians, we are called to witness to Creation. We urge all humans to join in this process with one elemental commitment: to choose life and not death in all that we do. We urge that, no matter how long inequity, deprivation, and powerlessness exist, humans not surrender this universal vision of improvement. As members of covenanted religions, we are committed to take up the task of perfecting the world, resisting the temptation to betray the goal by abandoning the deprived to their fate in order to live with our own advantage.

To show the way toward that perfect world, we tell the second story of the process of perfection, the story of covenant. The main point of this shared covenant story is that God has summoned humans to partnership in this process of perfecting the world. The divine respect and love for humans eventually leads to a full and equal partnership. (The term "eventually" refers to the maturation of the covenant, which we are living through in our time.) Initially, the covenant is hardly an equal partnership; still, out of divine respect, God calls all humans to participate in our own liberation. As the biblical stories of the Garden of Eden and the Flood indicate, God is often tempted to bestow perfection or to force humans to be free. But God must resist that temptation, and, indeed, we must also.

Giving or living the covenant represents a choice not to follow the main alternative historical policies that have been followed to perfect the world. To choose covenant as the vehicle of redemption represents a decision not to bestow perfection by divine grant or miracle. Similarly, the process of covenant is in tension with the dream of perfection through apocalyptic action. The affirmation of this worldly covenant represents a rejection of the

COVENANTAL PLURALISM

idea that redemption will occur through spiritual enlightenment only. If covenant is the way to perfection, then release from this world (seeing through existence and finding it an illusion) is not the answer. This latter way is the path of Kabbalah and of pietistic salvation, as of most Eastern religions, but it is not what covenant is about. Covenant rules out escape to another world, not even to a world to come, where perfection exists now. Finally, the Divine-human joint venture is a methodological alternative to a purely human revolution, in which humans take full charge, releasing themselves from God in order to achieve revolutionary transformation in their lifetime. Let it be noted that the path of smashing the old regime and perfecting the world now has been the main competitor with Jewish-Christian-Muslim loyalty over the last two centuries.

Each of these alternative methods includes elements of the covenantal mechanism. Each is an outcome of the breakdown of the dialectical tensions held together in covenant. Each of these alternatives makes its appearance in Jewish and Christian traditions also. Ultimately the method of covenant negates those alternatives in favor of the continuous, this-worldly, permanent process of perfection carried out by humans responsible to (and sustained by) the divine partner.

Covenant is in service of the fulfillment of Creation. It tells each one of us, addressing us collectively as organized in communities, that there is a cosmic struggle (reflected in each of us personally as well) between the force of life and the force of death. As humans we are asked to direct all our actions to the side of life. No action is neutral in this struggle. Since the goal of covenant is the triumph of life, its primary commandment is "Choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

"Behold I place before you today life and good, death and evil" (Deut. 30:15). The apposition is intentional. In every good act is the choice of life. That is the definition of good. There is in every evil act a choice of death. That is the definition of evil. Since we live in an imperfect world and humans are finite and flawed, not every action is a pure choice of life or death. Hence, we have guiding principles in our covenantal codes. In all situations, given what cannot be changed, there is still an ideal way to behave: to maximize the choice of life.

The covenant proceeds on certain assumptions. First, "I, God, am with [you] in trouble" (Ps. 91:15). The process of upgrading starts where humans are, in the suffering, evil-stained, broken reality where we live. God reaches out, often initiates, and often helps, but humans must respond and take full responsibility.

Second, human models are needed and chosen to serve as pacesetters. That is what Israel, the covenant people, is about; therefore, that is what

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

being a Jew or a Christian is about. Chosenness is not some inner charisma that I possess; nor is it some benefit bestowed arbitrarily. Even when unmerited grace is given, Scripture never loses sight of the greater vision that it serves. Election is predicated upon the redemption of humanity and is intended to advance that process. The inscrutable mystery is by what right anybody plays this role. In any event, the Torah does not start with the mystery of election, with the "beloved son," but with Creation itself. This paradigm people, the people of Israel, is meant to serve the advancement of the perfection of Creation. Election is not an end in itself; that would be idolatry. The people of Israel are human, of course, all too human. They frequently fail to live up to their mission. The avant-garde often substitutes sovereignty for service, self-glorification for servanthood, and corporate advantage and interest for priesthood. Those weaknesses (I do not mean to be cynical) only make the human pacesetting model more attainable by other human beings, for who is capable of totally selfless existence in God's presence?

Third, human emotions ought to be respected and built on. People have distinctive roots, languages, memories, and relationships. People do not grow in vacuums or in a "generic" humanity. They grow in communities, and communities have their own needs, their own lives, and their own distinctive patterns. The covenantal process starts with the affirmation that God loves us in our particularity, in our distinctiveness, in our body odor, in our pettiness, in our greatness, and, of course, in our historical existence as Jews or Christians or Muslims or Buddhists or whatever we are. First, we understand and affirm that truth; then we widen our own community and embrace the whole world eventually. To deny particularity and attachment, to engage in rejection of family and parent-child obligations for the sake of humanity's perfection, runs a real risk of undercutting love and turning people inhumane. This is the subtext of the Genesis stories.

To love a child is to play favorites. However, if one is not capable of loving a child or a parent particularly closely, then one is less than human. The challenge of covenant is to grow, to expand that consciousness and that sympathy for my own family until I come to the deepest truth: that everybody is my brother and sister. We are all children of Adam and Eve. Jews and Christians have differed sharply in the relative weight and risks in this balance of particular and universal, but, wherever the emphasis is placed, there are no guarantees of achieving the perfect equilibrium. Judaism sought to uphold family, but this ideal easily sinks into tribalism. Christianity sought to break through to all of humanity, but this idea often ends up as the imperialist agenda of an all-conquering missionary party, pushing for its own interests.

Fourth, the human pace is the true rate of perfecting the world. One must learn to live with a process that takes so long. Since the covenantal goal

COVENANTAL PLURALISM

cannot be achieved in one lifetime, the vision and the mission must be passed on from generation to generation, or the cause will die unfinished along the way. To pass on the covenant, one must create a partnership between the generations, not just between God and Israel. That means one must have children or adopt them. One must create a community to transmit values and memory. In order to achieve transmission, the community needs institutions and boundary practices and leadership characters and distinctive rituals that nurture and express its humanity. But these very mechanisms often create barriers and burdens; they generate enmities and hostilities. They often misdirect the community's energy. However, there is no other way of carrying out the mission—if one wants to work with humans.

The elected people of Israel play three classic roles as an avant-garde. First and foremost, they are teachers of humanity. They spread the vision, telling of God's wondrous ways. They educate us not to settle, not to sell out, and not to lose patience. Second, they serve as a model community, the living exemplification of the values and the path to perfection. They inspire by example, which means sanctification of God's name (*kiddush ha-Shem*), or they offer a model of failure that degrades the divine reputation (*hillul ha-Shem*). Last but not least, they are also coworkers with other humans in the process of perfection, because the divine covenantal love is not exhausted with any one people. After all, the Philistines were brought out of Caphtor and the Aramaians from Kir just as much as Israel was brought out of Egypt. Others can give their witness and their model as well. That also is the genius of covenant; it enables us to affirm the particularity of each group, to make room for other groups to give their witness and exemplify their particular way, as well.

Judaism and Christianity share the conviction that the covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants is foundational. It is the starting point of our journey. Both affirm the authenticity and authority of the Sinaitic covenant that transformed Abraham's way of God into the way of life of a people. However, we know that in the first century, in the midst of Judaism's encounter with Hellenism and in the course of a wracking political struggle, Jewish Christianity was born within the body of the Jewish people. This occurred shortly before the Jews experienced catastrophic destruction, exile, and powerlessness. For Judaism, over the course of the next centuries, this exile became a moment of covenant renewal, the flowering of Rabbinic Judaism. The Rabbis understood that God had self-limited to enable greater play for human decisions to shape the outcomes of history. In contrast to God's treatment of the Egyptians, God had not stopped the Romans. In allowing the destruction of the Temple, God had become more

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

hidden in order to call Israel to a fuller, more responsible partnership in the covenant. The hidden God was more present. The *Shekhinah* was everywhere—but had to be discovered. So the Rabbis educated the people as to how they could experience and practice holiness everywhere. They developed an ethic of powerlessness that gave dignity and meaning to Jewish life in the worst of exilic circumstances.

The Christians—attracted by Jesus' charisma, and moved by the retelling of his story—became convinced that the Messiah, the fulfiller of messianic promises, had come among them. Therefore, salvation was available right now. The mainstream of Christianity also became convinced, or at least affirmed in its faith, that God had become flesh, had become human, in order to achieve the goals of the covenant. Faith in Jesus, rather than Jewish observance, now opened the covenant to all of humanity. Ironically, this last accomplishment, i.e., universalization of the covenant, was a longtime dream that remained a highly sought conclusion of the covenant in Jewish understanding as well. When Judaism said no to the messianic claim, it pointed to the continuing evil in the world. Christians, rather than admit the contradiction in the presence of the evil, found it easier to respond by dismissing Judaism as "carnal," using Christian power to silence Jewish competition and to make Jews pay for their recalcitrance.

To the second Christian claim of Incarnation, i.e., that God had become flesh in their midst in order to deliver humanity from evil, Jews responded, "Absolutely not." Sometimes Jews charged Christianity with idolatry for speaking of incarnation. Such divine action is not necessary, argued the Jews. The covenantal divide between God and humans can be crossed in other ways. Jews were convinced that this was an age of Divine Presence through hiddenness. The Temple-like visibility of Jesus was unnecessary and inappropriate. Christianity responded that God intervened decisively to prove Christianity is right, i.e., through Resurrection. Since the history of the covenant is preparation for this moment, only Jewish obduracy and spiritual blindness could account for their resistance. Therefore, Judaism was labeled a blind fossil religion and was dismissed as superseded. Jewry was cast out from God's presence. He who is first shall be last.

Since Christianity based its authority on the foundations of Judaism, the ongoing existence of Jewry became a problem, a living contradiction to the faith. This inexorably led to the policy of eliminating the contradiction by explaining away (through stereotyping and theological degradation), converting, or killing Jews. Jews, feeling that their own vital signs were strong and that God's presence was closer than ever, became convinced that Christianity was an idolatrous, heretical cult following a false messiah and practicing a murderous ethic (as experienced in the Jews' own body).

COVENANTAL PLURALISM

Thus, both Christians in their contempt for Jews and Judaism and Jews in their rejection of Christianity and Christian power were pushed down the path of writing off this world and this life. Christianity and Judaism taught their followers to choose life; however, in their relationship to each other, intentionally or not, they chose death. I speak not just of death, killing, or murder. Hatred is also the death of life, the killing of life's capacity for love. When the gospel of love spread hatred of fellow human beings, it led to tragedy. When the religion of the image of God in every human being saw Christians as "*goyim*," it deviated from its best values.

How can Judaism and Christianity reassert the responsibilities of the covenant and take their proper role in the partnership of perfection of the world? One can start by saying that the moral and cultural credibility of Judaism and Christianity depends on overcoming the legacy and the image of their interactive hatefulness, and on their ability to set a standard of mutual respect that minimally equals the best standard of modern culture. Second, both religions face a common threat of being swamped by secularization and modernity that neither is strong enough to handle alone. For that matter, modern culture itself desperately needs religious and spiritual reinforcement that neither religion alone can give. Third, we live after the *Shoah*, which has made it clear that if we still believe in *ikun olam*, we need all the help we can get from every possible partner.

The Holocaust has unleashed a paroxysm of Christian self-critique and theological determination to overcome the "teaching of contempt" tradition. This is a healing sign of life and of remarkable spiritual and religious renewal that Jews still do not fully grasp. Any religion that can self-critique so powerfully shows incredible vitality. A faith that shows such a deep capacity for repentance demonstrates its capacity to be a vehicle of love and its fitness to help lead the world toward the perfection that God wants. This incredible renewal, this choosing of life, enables us to say that someday this period will be looked at as one of the great ages of Christianity's service to humanity. Of course, the *Shoah* has also dramatized the moral outrageousness of any tradition's—and that includes Judaism's—carrying on unrevised, negative stereotypes or contemptuous judgments that degrade the other. Contempt breeds apathy to others' fate, if not the will to participate in assault upon them. "Never again" demands the end of *all* contempt traditions wherever located, at all cost and as swiftly as possible.

I speak from the perspective of postmodernity and in the aftermath of the Holocaust when I offer an alternative reading of the birth of Christianity and the covenantal relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It was always God's plan to bring the vision of redemption and the covenantal way to a wider group of humanity. That is the purpose of an avant-garde, to bring the

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

whole army to its destination by scouting the dangers, by opening up and testing trails, by pushing ahead and pulling everybody else after them. Therefore, it was in the fullness of time that Christianity was born. After thousands of years the people Israel—in the narrower definition, the Jewish people—had sufficiently internalized the covenant to be able to take on new levels of responsibility. They were capable of shifting to a more hidden holiness without losing their connection to the Divine. It was the same fullness of time, in an era of the death of the gods—the Hellenistic gods—and the encounter of cultures, that there was remarkably high receptivity to the spiritual/ethical messages of the covenant, especially if they could be articulated in Hellenistic terms, to and for gentiles.

To reverse a classic image, it was God's purpose, then, that the shoot of the stalk of Abraham be grafted onto the root of the gentiles. Thus, they could be rooted in God and bear covenantal fruit on their tree of life. The group that would do it naturally—who else?—would have to grow out of the family and covenantal community of Israel. This is neither replacement nor repudiation but an offshoot, a reaching out to new masses. To be heard and followed, this religion must swim in the sea of the gentile people and their culture. It dare not be excessively culturally or literally Jewish. Therefore, although it grows in the bosom of Judaism and is profoundly marked by Jewish interpretation, it can and must and will take on the coloration of the people that it reaches. This very development would have to become independent, or it would erode Jewish distinctiveness and undermine the capacity of the Jewish covenant to continue as distinctively Jewish.

My argument is quite simple: Christianity had to start within Judaism, but it had to grow into its own independent existence if justice was to be done to the particularity of the covenant. The signal that triggered this growth, I would argue, would have to be discernible to the minimum number it would take to start a new religion. It would have to go unheard by the bulk of Jewry, not because of deafness or spiritual blindness, but because the signal was not intended for them. The Jewish majority would shortly be called to its renewed covenant, to its Rabbinic flowering. It was most inappropriate that a sacramental, more temple-oriented model be offered them. By contrast, gentiles entering the covenant needed such an approach. Did God then become incarnate to cross the covenantal divide in order to rescue humankind? Far be it from me as a Jew to prescribe to Christians or to God what happened in that religious experience. I can only suggest that the resurrection signal had to be so marginal, so subject to alternate interpretations, and the incarnation sign so subtle, as to be able to be heard in dramatically opposing fashions—one way by the band elected to start the new faith and another way by the majority of Jews called to continue the classical covenantal mission.

COVENANTAL PLURALISM

Such a resurrection, such an incarnation, no Jew need fear or fight. We need no monopoly of divine revelation or presence. I pray that the Holy Spirit will be present in all Christian activity, as I pray that it will be present in all Jewish activity. I am convinced equally that God would be far from intervening decisively to endorse the new covenant or supposedly to refute or supersede the old. What would such behavior say about the dependability of God's promises? Why should the original covenant, the older of the two covenants, be refuted by the birth of a new avant-garde any more than the first Noahide covenant was terminated by the election of Abraham? Far more likely, far more covenantal, and far more loving is the possibility that this was the divine resort to covenantal pluralism, so as to reach more human beings in human fashion through human communities.

The triumphalism, the rejectionism, the cruelty, and the mutual defamation all came out of the human need for reassurance that "indeed, I am the favorite child." The favoritism would make the travail of the faithful worthwhile. Somehow, if I suffered, it was not so bad, as long as I was assured that I had the right religion and the others had nothing. These deviations reflected the self-aggrandizement of communities that forgot that the ultimate prayer is that God's will be done, not that my agenda win out. Fratricide reflects the failure of imagination to conceive that the parent—in this case, the infinite Divine love—is not exhausted by one people's redemption. There is enough love in God to choose again and again. It is truly a case of a divine parent's loving each child infinitely without loving the first- or second-born any less.

The saddest part is that within the gospel of love there developed a permanent kernel of hate that only weakened its redemptive capacity. The saddest outcome is that the ongoing crucifixion of Jesus' family and loved ones, the Jewish people, climaxed in an act of genocide so horrendous that it can truly be described as a crime wrapped in purported divine instruction, "which I never commanded . . . and which never entered my mind," yet for which responsibility must be taken (Jer. 19:5). The saddest fact is that Jewry's counter-self-definition to Christianity pushed Judaism toward its own breakdown forms: tribalism, legalism, asceticism, and denial of this world. While the Jewish teaching of contempt was less acted upon, at least part of that restraint was because of Jewish powerlessness. Today, we live in an age of Jewish power restored; the continuation of such a self-centered tradition could turn lethal. Jewish people are as human as members of every other group; Jews need the same warning against the corruptions of power. It is time for repentance, for reconfiguring the relationship, for overcoming the internal degradation of the other, and for a new alliance of the people of God for the sake of witnessing to humanity and perfecting the world.

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

We know that actions evoke like reactions in all human endeavors. The power of love, the divine inspiration, and the ethical purity needed to overcome these millennia of hatred and conflict would itself give enormous new credibility to the joint and distinctive witness of each community. It would pave the way for the reassertion of religious leadership across the spectrum of the modern world's issues.

We have not yet grasped the richness of God's covenantal pluralism. Pluralism means more than accepting or even affirming the other. It entails recognizing the blessing in the other's existence, because it balances one's own position and brings all of us closer to the ultimate goal. Even when we are right in our position, the other who contradicts our position may be our corrective or our check against going to excess. After all, we are dealing with matters of enormous import and stake. I feel a great empathy for the Roman Catholic Church as it struggles between its conscience that tells it that women are equal, its insight that tells it that women and men must have distinctive roles, and its faithfulness that whispers to it that it dare not change gender roles lest it betray the tradition or undermine its own authority. My own Orthodox Jewish community is in about the same place. I must say I sleep better at night knowing that other religions are struggling with the same questions or that any decision I make that is one-sided will be corrected by other denominations in my own tradition or by other religions.

Pluralism offers us a better model than approval or disapproval. Let different denominations and groups stake out different positions. Let this be our chance to experience situations where those who are opposed strengthen and learn from each other. In the matter of abortion, the either/or position dominates. But (whichever position is right) the anti-abortion position has been a moral check against a potential devaluation of life, which would be the result of turning abortion into a casual practice. In turn, the pro-abortion position has upheld the priority of the mother's life and thus operated to balance the moral scales. When we enter new moral ground, let pluralism be our insurance. As the patriarch Jacob said, if one camp is badly beaten, then let the other camp be able to flee (Gen. 32:9). One of the best ways to traverse a slippery slope safely is to hold hands with each other along the continuum of positions so that each is held back from sliding and no one falls off the cliff. Pluralism also bespeaks God's love of variety and uniqueness. In pluralism we do not filter out the differences or turn everything gray. We encounter the full intensity of distinctive positions, witnessing in our uniqueness without distorting in our passion. By this token, pluralism is not relativism, for we hold on to our absolutes; however, we make room for others' as well.

COVENANTAL PLURALISM

This essay was originally presented in Tulsa, in the heartland of Evangelical Christianity. I know it is difficult to ask Evangelicals to consider the possibility that their own absolute faith in Jesus Christ can make room for the ongoing fullness of revelation, authenticity, and fulfillment in the Jewish covenant as an independent religion. Yet, the deepest truth is that unless we hold on to our absolutes in pluralist fashion, they turn pathological and tend to destroy others. We can avoid this pathology only if we get to know the limits of our position. My truth cannot or does not cover all people, all possibilities, or all times, because God wants others to contribute. We need the checks and balances to prevent the spinning out of control of our individual positions. This is why our dialogue is so vital and so necessary. We are embarked on one of the great moral adventures of all time: to give up triumphalism, to accept that it is God's will that will be done, to accept the fact that we are only servants and agents, and to know that we have not been the sole vehicles of God's love or the redemption that is coming. It is this generation's calling to undertake this task for the sake of redeeming suffering humanity.

Let us side-by-side, then, bring the Messiah instead of arguing whether it is the first or second coming. Instead of the fighting and the belittling and the denying that delays the coming, let there be mutual activity and love that hastens it. If we understand this alternative, then we will truly be worthy of our calling. We are the generation called to explore freedom, power, and affluence, which lie within the grasp of all humanity. There is sufficient food now to feed everybody. It is the distribution system that is broken. There is sufficient technological and economic power to create affluence for everybody. What is lacking is the focus on productivity and the will to exercise it. Let us undertake these tasks of repairing the world.

We are challenged to decide life-and-death questions that others did not live long enough to face. Fifty-five years ago during the Holocaust, my cousins in Europe could only decide how to die. My ancestors 500 years ago could only decide how to hunker down and maintain their dignity, despite being a battered people. The choices of poverty are fewer; of martyrdom and slavery, starker; of involuntary status as a Jew or Christian, simpler. But, what a privilege for us that our choices must be subtler and less obvious, that we must choose how to live rather than how to die, how to serve God in our strength rather than our incapacities, how to serve God as a favorite child, one of many favorite children! What parent will not welcome the opportunity to validate this deepest religious truth: I love each of my children as my favorite, and my love is not exhausted by that fact.