

A Muslim's "Dialogue" with Abraham Joshua Heschel

RIFFAT HASSAN

As a Muslim who has been much involved in Jewish-Christian-Muslim interreligious dialogue, I find that there is much in your essay "No Religion Is An Island" that I can identify with, Rabbi Heschel. I am saddened by the fact that though you understood the importance of having a face-to-face encounter with Muslims,¹ you did not live long enough to enter into a serious dialogue with Muslims, for if you had been able to do so, perhaps we—the few who struggle to build bridges across centuries of bigotry, bickering, and bitterness among our religious traditions—would not have floundered as we appear to be doing in our attempt to break through the complex web of ignorance and fear that makes dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims so hard. We need you so much today, even as we need Martin Buber. But the love of God and of humanity which shines through your words gives me hope and strength, and I begin to feel that though you cannot dialogue with us here-and-now in person, your spirit can still irradiate the dark and difficult passages that we must traverse before we can be where the light of God envelops us all.

If you were here today, Rabbi Heschel, what would I say to

you first? Your words have touched so many deep thoughts and feelings in me that it would not be easy to know where to begin. There are so many things that we—who have been strangers for much of our lives—need to talk about. But before I can say anything to you I would have to tell you how angry and frustrated and hurt I feel when I read or hear about the vicious stereotypes of Islam and Muslims which have spread like an epidemic in the Western world, especially in the United States, where I live with my young daughter. I know that the propaganda against Islam and Muslims is nothing new in the West. It is as old as the first chapter of Islamic history, when the new faith began to move into territories largely occupied by Christians. Dante, the great poet of medieval Christianity, perceived the Prophet of Islam as the “divider” of the world of Christendom and assigned him to all but the lowest level of hell for his grievous “sin.” I understand the politics of religious rivalry which colors our perception of those whom we consider to be not only “the other” but also “the adversary” who is seen as a grave threat to our power and truth-system, and I am sure that you would understand how I feel.²

Often enough as I am confronted with the image of Muslims as barbarous and backward, frenzied and fanatic, volatile and violent, and of Islam as a religion symbolized by the sword and “Holy War,” I still flinch each time this happens. Alas, gentle Rabbi, many Westerners who know virtually nothing about Islam still identify it with “Jihad” or “Holy War.” Even those who know that one of the primary meanings of the very word *Islam* is “Peace” seldom focus on the centrality of the concept of peace to the Islamic worldview.³

Your prophets, Rabbi Heschel, are my prophets and Jesus too is my prophet. Believing in all of God’s prophets, both named and unnamed, is an essential part of what constitutes “righteousness” according to the Qur’an. Indeed, the Qur’anic imperative requires not mere tacit acceptance but a verbal proclamation of a Muslim’s belief in prophets sent by God prior to the Prophet Muhammad.

Say: “We believe
In God, and in what
Has been revealed to us

And what was revealed
 To Abraham, Isma'il,
 Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes,
 And in [the books]
 Given to Moses, Jesus,
 And the Prophets,
 From their Lord:
 We make no distinction
 Between one and another
 Among them, and to God do we
 Bow our will [in Islam]."⁴

I am, of course, aware that whereas it is theologically necessary for Muslims to affirm the authenticity of all prophets who came before Muhammad, Jews and Christians, in general, do not think that they have any religious obligation to recognize Muhammad as a prophet of God. However, good Rabbi, tell me how any Christian or Jew who is called upon, like you, to believe that human beings have been made in the image of God and are, therefore, worthy of respect, deny even the basic respect owing to a human being of one whose unswerving faith in the One God transformed not only the idol-worshiping society in which he was born but also the face of the world?

You have said rightly, Rabbi Heschel, that genuine interreligious dialogue is based on reverence, but what reverence do I find shown to the Prophet of Islam in the extensive literature about Islam found in the West? His character has been assassinated in every conceivable way, and he has been called everything from "imposter" to "lecher." Tell me, learned Rabbi, has the founder of any other great religion of the world been treated in this way? If not, do the Muslims not have the right to ask why the Prophet of Islam should have been singled out for such treatment?

The painful fact is that the image of Islam and the Prophet of Islam which has been prevalent in the West generally, through the ages, is highly negative. What is particularly lamentable is that this image has been constructed not only by popular journalists or half-baked pseudo-scholars but also by scholars of gigantic stature. Can you understand the pain I feel when I learn

that St. Thomas Aquinas, who owed such profound debt to the thinkers of Muslim Spain, described Islam as nothing but a construct to accommodate the lust of Muhammad?⁵ What far-reaching shadows were cast upon the future by powerful Christian voices such as those of Dante and Aquinas can be glimpsed from Thomas Carlyle's historic lecture on "The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam" in the series entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. Writing in mid-nineteenth century, Carlyle urged his fellow Christians to dismiss "our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Imposter, a Falsehood Incarnate, that his religion is a mere quackery and fatuity."⁶ Carlyle's words and spirit are strongly reminiscent of yours and worthy of esteem. But Carlyle knew that his argument would have little chance of being accepted until he was able to remove the stigmas attached to Muhammad and Islam in the minds of his co-religionists.

The issue that you, Rabbi Heschel, felt called upon to respond to in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue is the same one that all religious Jews and Christians are called upon today to respond to in the context of Jewish and Christian dialogue with Muslims, namely, "the faith and the spiritual power of the commitment" of those Muslims (from among the one billion human beings who identify themselves as such) to whom the God of all, *rabb al 'alamin*, is an ever-present, living reality. While a handful of Jewish and Christian scholars who share your sensitivity to the faith of others have, in recent times, sought to understand and to present Islam and Muslims without bias and "from within" as it were, they remain very much a minority in comparison to the vast majority of Western Jews and Christians, scholars and nonscholars alike, who continue to see Islam and Muslims in stereotypical terms.

I do not need to tell you, learned Rabbi, what the impact of almost two thousand years of Christian anti-Semitic polemics has been upon Jewish people and history. It took a tragedy of the magnitude of the Holocaust to challenge the uncritical acceptance by many Western Christians of age-old stereotypes of "the Jew." I pray to God that it does not have to take a tragedy of the same magnitude to make Westerners—Jews and Christians—aware of the dangers of seeing "the Muslim"

through the colored lenses of age-old prejudices. It is my sincere hope that the holocausts involving the lives of many Middle Eastern Muslims, Christians, and Jews which we have witnessed in recent times serve as a warning to us, impelling us to find a way in which the continuing conflict among believers in the same merciful God can be resolved without further violence.

If Jews and Christians as well as Muslims had a soul like yours, Rabbi Heschel, they would be able to feel love and compassion toward all creatures of God and find it easy to reach out to "the other," "the stranger" in our midst and begin a dialogue which could transform their own lives as well as the world around them. But, I am sad to say, a soul like yours is rare in a world like ours, perhaps because most people today are far more interested in learning the art of attaining material success than in experiencing "a World of Pains and troubles" which is necessary, as pointed out by John Keats, "to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul." While "Soul-making" remains an ideal for those who believe—as I do—that with the mind alone one cannot reach the heart either of God or of humanity, it seems to me that a purging of the mind is a prerequisite even for preliminary dialogue. This is particularly important in the West which, with its Graeco-Roman heritage and its technological achievements, considers its mind to be its greatest asset and regards it as the major means for gaining knowledge of "ultimate truth."

You are indeed right, venerable Rabbi, when you say that "parochialism has become untenable" in our times when a new breadth of vision is required in understanding and relating to persons of other faiths or cultures. However, one does not witness "the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance" when it comes to the study of Islam in the West, especially—again—in the United States. I am sad to say, Rabbi Heschel, that the prospects of bringing about a significant change in Western—particularly American—views of Islam or Muslims through the educational system seem to be dismal at this time. It has been an ongoing struggle even for Western Jews, with all the resources and organization of their well-knit communities, to combat the anti-Semitism of the Western world. Obviously lacking such resources and organization, Muslims liv-

ing in the West seem to be unable to launch an effective campaign to combat the anti-Islamic ideas and images which pervade the general atmosphere of Western societies and institutions. Given this situation, is interreligious dialogue between Western Christians and Jews and Muslims possible? Is it not—as you have maintained—the basic requirement for interreligious dialogue, Rabbi Heschel, that dialogue partners have some sort of parity or equality when they come together to talk about matters which are both deep and difficult?

Then there is the matter of the *language* of interreligious dialogue between Western Christians and Jews and Muslims. Today we have become very sensitive to the use, say, of sexist language and strive to avoid it because it contributes to “a universe of sexist suppositions.”⁸ However, not much attention has been paid to the use of improper language in interreligious dialogue, particularly with non-Western religions. For instance, the customary practice of Western scholars to refer to Islam as “Mohammedanism” and to Muslims as “Mohammedans” continues. Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb, one of the foremost Islamicists of modern times, has entitled his book, *Mohammedanism*,⁹ and even you, Rabbi Heschel, have referred to Muslims as “Mohammedans.” To Muslims, both “Mohammedanism” and “Mohammedan” are completely unacceptable terms, and they regard them as classic cases of misnaming.

To underscore the importance of correct naming, it may be apt to recall the ancient wisdom of Confucius, who said: “If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.”¹⁰ To Muslims, Islam means living in accordance with the will and pleasure of God. Thus God, not Muhammad, is the center of a Muslim’s religious life. Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, or others, may consider it appropriate to name themselves and their religions after their “founders,” but Muslims do not regard Muhammad as the “founder” of Islam. It is a basic article of a Muslim’s belief that Islam is the religion not only of Muhammad, who is seen as the final prophet, but of all the prophets before him. That Islam—the eternal message of God to all humanity—is not to be identified, in exclusive terms, with Muhammad—a mortal man—is stated clearly and emphatically by the Qur’an.¹¹

In fact, in the Islamic tradition, it is not Prophet Muhammad, but Prophet Abraham who is regarded as “the first Muslim.”¹²

From a Muslim perspective, the Western identification of Islam with Mohammedanism and Muslims with Mohammedans is symptomatic of the West’s inability or unwillingness to accept the Muslim definition of Islam as a revealed religion whose source and center is the One Universal God. Since it is a precondition of interreligious dialogue that each partner defines herself or himself,¹³ there can, obviously, be no interreligious dialogue with Muslims unless the Christian or Jewish dialogue partners recognize that Muslims have the same right as they have to define themselves and their religious tradition, and not seek to impose their own definitions on the faith of the Muslims.

Rabbi Heschel, the few Muslims who engage in interreligious dialogue with Western Christians and Jews are painfully aware of the fact that, due to a variety of reasons including political and religious authoritarianism, it is virtually impossible for any kind of interreligious, or even intrareligious, dialogue to take place in most Muslim countries at this time. We are, therefore, very grateful to have an opportunity to participate in interreligious dialogue sponsored by Western Christians and Jews. However, it has been our common experience that most interreligious dialogues in the West are dominated by Christian concepts and categories, and that the dialogue partner (Jew or Muslim) is required to “dialogue” in terms which are not only alien to his or her religious ethos but that may also be hostile to it. For instance, Muslims are all too often asked by Christians, “What is the Islamic concept of salvation or redemption?” Since *salvation* and *redemption* have no particular meaning in the Islamic tradition, which does not accept the Christian idea of salvation or redemption, the asking of such questions points to either an ignorance of Islam—a common problem which I have referred to earlier—or an assumption that concepts which are important in the Christian tradition must necessarily be so in the Jewish and Islamic traditions. There comes a time when we have to recognize that we cannot give authentic answers to inauthentic questions. There comes a time when, in faithfulness to our own basic integrity as Muslims, we have to refuse to answer such questions.

In this “dialogue,” kind Rabbi, I have spoken to you as a Muslim who is deeply distressed about Western perceptions of Islam and Muslims and also about the state of affairs regarding interreligious dialogue between Western Christians and Jews and Muslims. But despite all the pain and disillusionment which I have experienced in the course of my long sojourn in the Western world and of my many encounters with Jewish and Christian, as well as Muslim, dialogue partners, I remain firmly committed to participating in, and promoting, interreligious dialogue, especially among those who believe in the one God who creates and sustains all of us and who commands us to treat each other with justice and compassion. My commitment is rooted in what I understand the Qur’an to be saying to me about God’s attitude toward humanity, toward the righteous, and toward religious diversity. In summation of this “dialogue,” I would like to refer to some Qur’anic ideas and teachings which are profoundly relevant in the context of interreligious dialogue in general, and of your views in particular.

God’s nearness to, and concern for, humanity is reflected in many Qur’anic passages. For instance, we are told that God is closer to a human being “than (his) jugular vein,”¹⁴ that God “careth for all”¹⁵ and listens “to the prayer of every suppliant who calls” upon God.¹⁶ That God is “Oft-Forgiving, Full of loving-kindness”¹⁷ and has “inscribed for Himself (the rule of) Mercy”¹⁸ is reiterated by the Qur’an which points out that God “hath promised good unto all”¹⁹ and that God’s bounties “are not closed (to anyone).”²⁰

One clear sign of God’s concern for all humankind is that God’s guidance has been sent to all. Affirming the universality of its own message, the Qur’an affirms that it is an admonition “to all creatures”²¹ and “to any (who are) alive,”²² that it is addressed to “all the Worlds”²³ and “to whoever among you wills to go straight.”²⁴ The Qur’an also tells us that God has sent “among every people an apostle”²⁵ and will raise “from all peoples a witness.”²⁶ The Prophet Muhammad is himself designated as “a universal messenger”²⁷ and the first House of God built by the Prophet Abraham and his son Prophet Isma’il is described as being “appointed . . . Full of blessing/and of guidance/For all kinds of beings.”²⁸

Though no creature of God is denied a place in God's heart, the Qur'an makes it clear that God especially loves,²⁹ protects,³⁰ and rewards³¹ those who have faith and act righteously. Affirming that "God suffereth not/The reward to be lost/Of those who do good,"³² the Qur'an takes a stand against those who make exclusive claims to God's favor on account of religious affiliation.³³ Even professing Islam does not, in and by itself, give a Muslim any kind of an advantage over any other person who believes in God and acts with righteousness, and the Qur'an states clearly:

Those who believe [in the Qur'an]
 And those who follow the Jewish [scriptures],
 And the Christians and the Sabians,
 Any who believe in God
 And the Last Day,
 And work righteousness,
 Shall have their reward
 With their Lord; on them
 Shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.³⁴

Many Westerners think of Islam as a religion spread by the sword. Coercion in matters of belief is, however, forbidden by the Qur'an, which proclaims, "Let there be no compulsion in religion."³⁵ That the duty of the Prophet Muhammad is "only to preach the clear message"³⁶ is stated many times by the Qur'an, which also makes clear that it is not God's way to compel anyone to believe.³⁷

Diversity of belief follows not only from freedom of will but also from the fact that God has created great diversity among the peoples of the world,³⁸ that one of the basic purposes of diversity is to encourage dialogue among different people, that a person's ultimate worth is determined not by what group he or she belongs to but how God-conscious he or she is. This view reminds me of your emphasis on the need for humility in inter-religious communication, Rabbi Heschel, and of your observation that "in this aeon, diversity of religions is the will of God." If one is aware of being in the presence of God, whom the opening statement of the Qur'an describes as *rabb al-'alamin*,

i.e., creator and sustainer of all the peoples, one cannot but be humble when one reaches out to the “other” who, like us, has been created by God from a common source.

The God who has decreed diversity has also decreed dialogue in order that we may discover our common roots and journey together toward our common goal. The paths we follow may not be the same, but the agony of the quest, the passion of seeking, is the same. There is much in the Qur’an which relates particularly to the relationship of “the People of the Book”—Jews, Christians, Muslims—to God and to each other. I believe that if we could understand what the Qur’an is telling us we would be able to overcome many difficulties which impede our dialogue. But much work has to be done—by Muslims, Jews, and Christians—separately and together, before we can comprehend and transcend all that separates us as human beings and as believers in the same loving, merciful, dialogue-oriented God. We have still a long, long way to go, Rabbi Heschel; hence this “dialogue” must continue.

NOTES

1. See Harold Kasimow’s article in this volume.
2. See Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, John Ciardi, trans. (New York and Scarborough: Mentor, New American Library, 1954), p. 236.
3. For a detailed discussion on the concept of “peace” in Islam, see Riffat Hassan, “Peace Education: A Muslim Perspective,” in Haim Gordon and Leonard Grob, eds., *Education for Peace: Testimonies from World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 90–108.
4. Surah 3: *Al-‘Imran*: 84. Most of the passages from Qur’an cited in this paper are taken from *The Holy Qur’an*, A. Yusuf Ali, trans. (Brentwood, Md: Amana Corp., 1983), p. 55; see also Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 136, 177, Surah 3: *Al-‘Imran*: 84. pp. 69–70, 55, 145.
5. References to Aquinas made by E. W. Fernea in her presentation on “Roles of Women in Islam: Past and Present” at Ta’ziyeh Conference held at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, on May 2, 1988.
6. Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam,” in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1903), pp. 42–77. Quote from p. 43 (emphasis mine).
7. *Letters of John Keats*, selected by Frederick Page (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 267.

8. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 5.
9. Hamilton A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
10. Quoted by Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York, Evanston, London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958), p. 161.
11. Surah 3: *Al-'Imran*: 144, p. 159.
12. Surah 22: *Al-Hajj*: 78, p. 872.
13. See Leonard Swidler, "Fifth Commandment," in "The Dialogue Decalogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20:1 (Winter 1983), p. 2.
14. Surah 50: *Qaf*: 16, p. 1412.
15. Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 268, p. 109.
16. Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 186, p. 73.
17. Surah 85: *Al-Baqarah*: 14, p. 1716.
18. Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 12, 54, p. 292, 302, respectively.
19. Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 95, p. 211.
20. Surah 17: *Bani Isra'il*: 20, p. 699.
21. Surah 25: *Al-Furqan*: 1, p. 926.
22. Surah 36: *Ya-Sin*: 70, p. 1186.
23. Surah 38: *Sad*: 87, p. 1234; also Surah 81: *At-Takwir*: 27, p. 1697.
24. Surah 81: *At-Takwir*: 28, p. 1697.
25. Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 36, p. 665.
26. Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 89, p. 680.
27. Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 170, p. 233; also Surah 34: *Saba*: 28, pp. 1142–1143.
28. Surah 3: *Al-'Imran*: 96, pp. 147–48.
29. See Surah 3: *Al-'Imran*: 134, p. 157; and Surah 19: *Maryam*: 96, p. 786.
30. See Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 38, p. 26; Surah 10: *Yunus*: 62, p. 500–1, and Surah 33: *Lugmun* 22, p. 1086.
31. See Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 277, p. 112; Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 95, p. 210–11; Surah 10: *Yunus*: 63–64, p. 501; and Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 26, p. 1313.
32. Surah 9: *At-Taubah*: 120, pp. 477–78; also see Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 282, p. 113; and Surah 20: *Ta-Ha*: 112, p. 814.
33. Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 111–12, p. 48.
34. Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62, pp. 33–34. The contents of this passage are repeated, virtually without change, in Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 69, p. 265.
35. Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256, p. 103.
36. See Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 82, p. 679; and Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 48, p. 1320.

37. Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 107, p. 321; Surah 10: *Yunus*: 99, pp. 509–10; Surah 18: *Al-Kahf*: 29, p. 738.

38. See Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*: 13—see *The Message of the Qur'an*, Muhammad Asad, trans. (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), p. 793.

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