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First Annual Sacks Lecture

WOMEN AND THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Jonathan Sacks

Chief Rabbi of
the United Kingdom

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Foreword by
Malcolm Weisman

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FOREWORD

The Centre for the Study of Theology in the University of Essex is especially concerned with contemporary issues, and in 1992 in particular the Church of England was severely divided by the issue of women priests. Indeed that is an issue that still in 1993 involves the Church in continuing controversy.

Also in 1992, through the generosity of Mr Kenneth Rubens and the Acacia Trust, the Sacks Annual Lecture was endowed in the University of Essex in honour of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. The Chief Rabbi himself delivered the first lecture and it seemed appropriate to him to put forward a Jewish view on women and their role in religious life. Such a view within the context of the Theology Centre's aim to explore how issues of theology and life in general society co-relate seemed extremely relevant and topical to Dr Sacks. His inaugural lecture - to be followed in future by others stressing the significance of the Judeo-Christian heritage in contemporary

times - is surely extremely pertinent to all regardless of religious background or none.

Quoting a renowned Hasidic Rabbi who told his disciples that they must live with the times, Dr Sacks stresses that such a statement means one must re-enforce one's basic fundamental principles as a counter-guard to a modernity that sometimes can be negative and destructive to society in the widest sense of that term.

In pursuing this theme, Dr Sacks starts right at the beginning by comparing the Jewish and Christian approaches to the account in the Book of Genesis of the creation of man and woman. On this basis, he says, woman is "an equal and independent moral agent" who can have "a depth of insight into the Divine purposes not always shared by men". In other words, Judaism treats the role of man and woman as that of equals. In support of this approach he points out that, according to the rabbis of old, there are recorded in the Bible the experiences of seven Prophetesses in addition to those of forty-eight Prophets.

Nevertheless, as Dr Sacks makes clear, the role of the Priesthood in Judaism, which ceased to have a daily relevance after the final destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, was always reserved exclusively for men. Therefore that issue is not a contemporary one. Nevertheless, he admits that the debate on the role of women in Judaism still continues. What of women rabbis in today's Jewish society? Dr Sacks does not answer this question directly but re-affirms the emphasis that Judaism puts on the partnership between man and woman,

pointing out that the first mention of the Hebrew word for woman - *"Isha"* - appears in the Bible before the Hebrew word for man - *"Ish"*. (Adam merely meaning 'that which comes from the earth').

Man, says Dr Sacks, must discover the other before he discovers himself. That is, he says, our current task. Whether the Chief Rabbi has explored this issue to the full may be the subject of argument. Traditionally observant Jewish women feel that they have a different but equally important spiritual role within the family, leaving the men to play a predominant role in the Synagogue. Is there a lesson here for the Church of England or other Churches where many women feel unfulfilled unless they can serve as fully ordained priests? By demanding full rights as priests do they diminish their role in the family which traditionally in Judaism can be more important than the Synagogue? These are questions inevitably raised by Dr Sacks' propositions and arguments.

The Chief Rabbi does not attempt to give perfectly precise and clinically tidy answers to these questions. He merely discusses valuable source material from the common Judeo-Christian heritage in order to make the examination of Women and the Religious Life a little easier. In that respect Dr Sacks has surely more than succeeded.

Malcolm Weisman

The Rev. Malcolm Weisman M.A. (Oxon) is a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Theology, a member of the University Court, and Jewish Chaplain to the University.

Women and the Religious Life

CHIEF RABBI DR JONATHAN SACKS

I was honoured to be invited to deliver the first Sacks Lecture at Essex University; more honoured still that this Annual Lecture should have been established in my name. I take that less as a tribute than as a responsibility to further the cause of understanding between faiths, and as a measure of the bold, admirable and necessary vision of Essex University and its Centre for the Study of Theology in providing an arena in which our many faiths can meet and learn from one another.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the University, which gave me the privilege of a Visiting Professorship in 1989 and which has proved hospitable to many other scholars in the field of theology and ethics. I recall with particular warmth the friendship of the Revd Dr Andrew Linzey, who first introduced me to its fellowship; the dedication of the Revd Malcolm Weisman who has done so much to create a Jewish presence there as in so many other communities; and to the generosity of Mr Kenneth Rubens and the Acacia Trust who have made this lectureship possible.

May they and we be rewarded by the growth of understanding that God has created many faiths, but only one world in which we must learn to live together, enhanced, not diminished, by our diversity.

It is said that the Hasidic leader Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn once gathered his disciples and told them, 'One must live with the times'. The disciples were bemused.

The Hasidic movement was a set of pietist-mystical sects which flourished in Eastern Europe from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. For them, 'the times' meant modernity in its most disintegrative sense: secularisation and the loss of the structures and certainties of traditional Jewish life.

Their response was to turn inward, to mysticism and meditation, and to the Jewish community as a spiritual enclave. They became, in Elie Wiesel's arresting phrase, 'souls on fire'. Far from living with the times, they had created in one small Russian township after another, citadels of timelessness. What then, they asked the rabbi, did he mean by saying that one should live with the times? He replied: 'One must live with the *sedra* [biblical reading] of the week'.

It was a masterly ambiguity. Each week, Jews read a portion of the Mosaic books (the Torah), completing them in a year. The weekly reading is part of the structured rhythm of Jewish life with its daily, weekly and yearly cycles of prayer and study, Sabbaths and festivals, remembrances and celebrations. There is secular time, the rush and press of events. And there is Jewish time, with its endlessly repeated sequences of sanctification. There is, the Rabbi was telling his disciples, more than one system of meanings, and more than one way of living with the times.

One debate or two?

Towards the end of 1992, the religious news in Britain was dominated by the debate within the Church of England over the ordination of women. Newspaper headlines spoke of 'schism', 'civil war' and a 'divided church'. At the same time the Jewish press carried reports of a dispute over the permissibility or otherwise of women-only prayer groups, a matter on which I was called to give a ruling.

The result was predictable. My office was besieged by the media, which had leapt to the assumption that what was happening in the Church was happening in the Synagogue. Here were two controversies at the same time involving the same subject: women and the religious life. Surely, then, they were *the same controversy*, breaking out simultaneously in Judaism and Christianity?

They were not, and it is part of the task of understanding to see how they are not. It is not only the media that are prone to see equivalence in two events ostensibly similar but belonging to different frameworks of meaning. Any of us is liable to make the same mistake. In the nineteenth century, anthropologists made arduous journeys in search of different cultures and ways of life. Today, in most of the societies of the West, we have become anthropologists. Different cultures are part of our daily experience of the street, the neighbourhood and the television screen. We are regularly called on to make efforts of understanding of events and developments taking place in

cultures not our own. There is a temptation to see them all from a single perspective, as if what they mean to participants is the same as they mean to us, the observers. It is a temptation to be resisted. As the rabbi signalled to his disciples: there is more than one system of meanings, more than one way of living with the times.

The debates within the Church and the Synagogue about the role of women are quite distinct. They arise, to be sure, from the same external circumstance: the metamorphosis in the position of women in secular society. But when great religious traditions confront the same issue, they do so from within their own unique and characteristic languages of thought, bringing to bear the quite different means by which they seek to discern the will of God.

The contrast between Judaism and Christianity is particularly instructive, for here are two religions which trace their ancestry to a shared origin and a common set of texts, known to Jews as Tenakh, the Hebrew Bible, and to Christians as the Old Testament. From the first century of the Common Era onwards, the two religions went their separate ways: Judaism through the articulation of the Oral Law in such works as the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud; Christianity through the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers. Nonetheless, one would expect to find substantial points of contact and consensus as the two faiths searched their partially overlapping textual traditions.

In fact, we do not. Where we would anticipate agreement, we find divergence.

The same words turn out to mean different things to the two faiths. Even in saying this, I simplify. To speak of Judaism or Christianity is already to gloss over the considerable internal diversity of both faiths. In what follows, I use broad brush-strokes to paint the most basic of contrasts. What emerges, though, is a not unimportant truth: that texts, concepts and symbols do not convey an unequivocal meaning. A single sentence may convey quite different messages when read in the context of different traditions. Far from resolving controversy, texts are its battle-ground.

One of the most valuable ways of understanding religious difference is to look at the ways in which different groups interpret their key words and texts. I do so here through three examples which have a critical bearing on the question of women and the religious life: the first two chapters of Genesis, the concept of revelation, and the institution of priesthood.

Creation

The starting point for theological reflection about the role and status of women lies in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. There, however, we find not one account of the creation of woman, but two. In the first chapter we read:

> Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock,

> over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.

The second chapter contains quite a different narrative. Man - the male is created first 'from the dust of the earth' into which God breathes the breath of life. But he is initially alone:

> The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him [*ezer kenegdo*].' Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air ... But for the man no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, He took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib He had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman" for she was taken from man.'

The differences are evident. In the first chapter, man and woman are created simultaneously, side-by-side as it were. Both are equally described as being in the image of God. In the second, man is created first. Woman appears derivative or secondary, in two senses. Ontologically, she is made *after* and *out of* man.

Functionally she is made to *serve* man, as his 'suitable helper'.

The problem for the two religious traditions was to derive coherent teachings from these apparently conflicting texts. Both did so, but they were different teachings. I begin with the case of Christianity, and with the argument of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul is setting out the proposition that in prayer, men should have their heads uncovered while women should cover theirs. He supports this by referring to the Genesis texts, to which he gives a distinctive interpretation. This particular passage was to play a lively part in the Church of England's debate amongst those opposed to women's ordination:

> A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have the sign of authority on her head.

Paul is here using the techniques of rabbinic hermeneutics (*midrash*) to resolve the conflict between Genesis 1 and 2. He takes Genesis 2 as the determinative passage, and understands Genesis 1 in the light of it. Woman is secondary and subordinate to man. She is made from him and for him. Creation involves hierarchy, with the human male at its apex.

Augustine spells out Paul's exegesis.

Genesis 1 is to be taken as saying the 'the woman together with her husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned as a help-mate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God; but as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God, just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one.' The hierarchy is reaffirmed. Man on his own is the image of God; woman is so only when joined to man. Genesis 2 controls our understanding of Genesis 1.

The rabbinic understanding of these passages is strikingly different. The sages of the first centuries of the Common Era took the relationship of Genesis 1 and 2 to be one of *klal u-ferat*, a general statement followed by a detailed articulation. Genesis 1 was therefore determinative. Man and woman are ontologically equal. Both are in the image of God.

There is, to my knowledge, no equivalent in the early rabbinic literature to Paul's interpretation. Indeed, wherever there is a suggestion of hierarchy in the biblical text, the rabbis ethicised the narrative and made it conditional on conduct. Thus, man was created last in nature so that on the one hand 'he might immediately enjoy the banquet', but on the other 'if he becomes proud he may be reminded that even the gnat preceded him in the order of creation'. [1] Even the mandate given to him to have dominion over other creatures was conditional. With a bold exegetical stroke the rabbis used a play on words - *uredu*

(rule) and *yerdu* (descend) - to read the phrase 'and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air,' as 'If they deserve it, they will rule; if they do not, they will descend.' [2]

Who, then, is superior to whom in the order of creation? It depends on how they behave. The rabbis were profoundly opposed to *ontological* hierarchies: an ordering of humanity or nature according to their essential being. What mattered was the *ethical* hierarchy, the superiority of good over evil, and this had nothing to do with gender.

Only thus can we understand the radical re-interpretation they gave to the description of woman as a 'suitable helper' for man. Splitting the Hebrew phrase into two, *ezer* ('helper') and *kenegdo* (understood to mean 'over against him'), Rabbi Elazar said: 'This means: if he is worthy she will help him; if he is unworthy she will oppose him.' [3] 'Woman has been transformed from man's assistant to his conscience. She has become an equal and independent moral agent. Nor is this an arbitrary reading. Admittedly it is far from the plain sense of the text. But it accords with the image of woman in Genesis as represented by Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. It is a *davar ha-lomed me-inyano*, an interpretation governed by overall context. The women of Genesis have a depth of insight into the Divine purpose not always shared by men.

In a similar vein, Rav Hisda interpreted the phrase 'Then the Lord God made [*vayiven*] a woman from the rib' to mean that God 'endowed woman with a greater

measure of understanding [*binah*] than man.' [4] Rabbi Simlai dismissed the significance of woman's creation from man in the following terms: 'In the past, Adam was created from dust and Eve was created from Adam, but henceforth it shall be "In our image, according to our likeness," neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Holy Spirit.' [5]

So rabbinic Judaism had no view of the inherent superiority of men. Woman was equally and independently in the image of God. She was not created to serve man. Instead, the description of her as man's 'suitable helper' was given a new interpretation. More strikingly still, consistently with their rejection of the Pauline doctrine of original sin, the rabbis attached no legal weight to the curse of Eve: 'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (Gen. 3:16). It is this verse to which Paul appears to allude in 1 Corinthians 14: 34-5:

> As in all the congregations of God's people, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

The rabbis, by contrast, drew no inferences from Genesis 3:16 other than the rule that a husband must be sensitive to his

wife's sexual needs. [6] Since a woman's desire for her husband is at the behest of God, the rabbis reasoned that he must pay particular attention to it. The verse is thus turned from a curse to a statement of women's conjugal rights within marriage.

Revelation

So the two religions took different and sharply divergent paths in their interpretation of the key biblical texts. They did so in a second way: in their respective understandings of the concept of *revelation.*

Judaism and Christianity are religions of revelation. They believe not merely that God exists, but that He discloses Himself to humanity and thus communicates His presence, will and redemptive power. But how? Through what vehicle of communication? No sooner do we ask this question than we find that the two faiths held quite different views of the Divine-human encounter. This too has consequences for women and the religious life.

In Pauline Christianity, God is revealed in the human situation in the form of a person - one in whom God is incarnate, and in whose life the drama of redemption is made real. In Judaism, God never reveals himself in the form of a person. [7] Instead He communicates with humanity through words. Judaism is a religion of words - the words of the covenant, the words to which the Israelites pledged themselves at Mount

Sinai, the words of the Mosaic books. There are many other holy words in Judaism: those of the prophets and the sages and of the continuing exposition which constitutes the Oral Law. But they are secondary to and explicative of the core of Judaism's revelation: the words of the Written Torah contained in the five books of Moses.

The theological parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity more than anything expresses itself in this. For Judaism, the radical transcendence of God means that He cannot be embodied in any finite aspect of creation. No place, object or person can be *identified* with God. None is ultimately and inherently holy. Thus, in nothing is God incarnate. God is utterly above the human situation. To be sure, God and man meet, but they do so in conversation. The decisive encounters in the Hebrew Bible are ones of speaking and listening. Language is the vehicle of revelation. Only Words are holy. In prophecy, God speaks to man. In prayer, man speaks to God. The Bible says that God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life, and man became 'a living being'. The authoritative rabbinic translation, the Targum of Onkelos, renders this phrase as 'a speaking being'. Relationships - between persons, and between the self and God - take place through communication, which means through words.

As a result, in Judaism no place, object or person is unconditionally and eternally holy. The holiest place, Mount Sinai, on which

God revealed himself to the assembled people of Israel, remained in its state of sanctity only as long as revelation lasted. Immediately thereafter it returned to secularity and cattle could graze on it. The holiest object - the tablet of stone on which God Himself had engraved the commandments - was smashed by Moses when he came down from the mountain, saw the Golden Calf and understood that God had withdrawn His presence from the people. The holiest person, Moses, whose words alone constitute eternally binding legislation, remains in Jewish theology a mere mortal: someone who sinned and was denied entry into the promised land. God's presence is conditional. He is where His will is done.

From this an important consequence follows. God cannot be either male or female. These are human attributes, by which God cannot be confined. Indeed one of the central tasks of Jewish theology - from the early rabbinic translations (*Targumim*) to the great philosophical endeavours of the Middle Ages - was systematically to spell out Judaism's opposition to anthropomorphism, the idea that God has human attributes. When the Hebrew Bible or the rabbinic sages describe God in human terms, they do so metaphorically and not literally. This, to us, self-evident proposition was nonetheless felt to be in such need of emphasis that it forms the programme of such works as the Targum of Onkelos and the first book of Moses Maimonides' philosophical masterpiece, the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Accordingly, God could be described at times in masculine terms, at others in feminine, depending on context. The Israelites, singing their song at the Red Sea, speak of God as a 'man of war'. Isaiah, speaking of God's compassion, says 'Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you'. God could appear at times as a man of battle, at others as a consoling mother. Jewish mysticism was later to take up and elaborate on both the male and female aspects of the Divine being. In particular, God's indwelling presence - the *Shekhinah* - became identified in Jewish poetry and liturgy with female images. It was a bride, a queen. But these were conscious figures of speech, metaphors drawn from the human imagination. As a mediaeval liturgical poet put it:

> They imagined You, but not as You really are;
> They likened You in accordance with your deeds.
> They represented You in countless visions;
> Yet, in all the imagery, You are One.

It followed both from this and from Genesis 1's statement of the equality of man and woman, that God could reveal himself prophetically to either. There were prophets and prophetesses. According to the rabbis of the Talmud, there were 48 prophets and seven prophetesses. God commands Abraham, 'Listen to whatever Sarah tells you' (Gen. 21:12). Rebekah receives a revelation telling her which of her

sons will be the bearer of the covenant (Gen. 25:23). Isaac does not, with tragic consequences. Deborah sits as both a prophetess and a judge (Judges 4:4-5). Prophets have defined authority in Jewish law, and the great twentieth century halakhist, the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, reaffirmed that this authority attaches equally to women and men. [8]

Thus a question of great significance to Christianity did not arise in Judaism, nor could it have done so. If God is to take human form, *which* human form - male or female - is a fact of consequence. Within Christian theology there can thus be a debate about the import of the fact that, within its beliefs, God chose to become incarnate in the form of a man rather than a woman. In Judaism no such debate can arise, because God does not *become* human. Instead He *addresses* human beings in prophecy, and a prophet may be a man or a woman.

Priesthood

The third axis of difference between the two faiths is more unexpected. Indeed it is one of the most fascinating phenomena of their respective developments. Christianity was perceived both by its adherents and by Jews as something new. It represented, said Paul, a new covenant, a new testament, a new dispensation. Judaism, by contrast, was seen both by Jews and Christians as something old. It was the old Israel, adhering to the original covenant. Nonetheless, in one significant respect,

Judaism was the more radical and Christianity the more conservative. It concerned their respective understandings of religious worship and leadership after the destruction of the second Temple.

The fundamental institutionalised expression of worship in the Bible is the offering of sacrifices. Sacrifices were intimately bound with a particular place and a particular set of persons: with the Temple and priests [*cohen*, pl. *cohanim*]. The priesthood - the hereditary prerogative of the sons of Aaron - was a distinct hierarchy in the religious life. In the rites of atonement, the priest was the religious virtuoso, mediating between the repentant sinner and God.

The destruction of the second Temple had profound consequences for both faiths. It soon became clear - certainly by the time of the suppression of the Bar Kochba rebellion in 135 C.E. - that the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the holy land were not imminent. Jerusalem had become a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were forbidden entry on pain of death. It was not until 1948 that Jews were to recover sovereignty in the land of their beginnings.

What then became of those central institutions of the religious life: sacrifice and the priesthood? We speak here of vast themes, of the Christian dimension of which I am not a scholar. But in the simplest of terms we can characterise the development thus: what in Christianity was spiritualised, in Judaism was democratised.

Early Christian writings still speak of

atonement through sacrifice. Now, though, it has become a single metahistorical and metaphysical sacrifice in the form of the crucifixion. The precise nature of this sacrifice is given different expression in different strands of thought. For some the controlling image is of the Passover sacrifice, the paschal lamb. For others, it is the binding of Isaac. For others again it is the sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement by the High Priest to secure absolution for all sins. The metaphors vary. What is common to them, though, is the idea of a single sacrifice turning into a transfiguring event through which, in the vicarious participation brought about by faith, all mankind may find forgiveness. The crucifixion becomes, as it were, the Platonic form of sacrifice.

Correspondingly, the early Church retained the concept of priesthood and with it a hierarchy of holiness. The priest is, by virtue of his office, a holy person and can thus perform rites and mediate in the process of salvation in the way that a lay person cannot.

Judaism did neither. Sacrifices had ceased, but it was a cardinal belief that they would not return until the Temple had been rebuilt (which it has not, to this day). To be sure, sacrifices were not forgotten. They were and are constantly alluded to in our prayers. But for Judaism what was and is decisive is that the messianic age, the redemptive moment, has not yet happened. To be Jewish is to live in a world capable of, indeed promised, redemption but not yet redeemed. Jewish spirituality since the

destruction of the second Temple is therefore etched with a sense of loss.

Judaism did not spiritualise the sacrifices; instead, it found substitutes for them. Where once a sacrifice delivered from death, now charity would do likewise. Study now took on a new significance. One could not offer a sacrifice, but one could learn its laws, and this too joined man and God. Above all, prayer and atonement became the avenues through which man approached the Divine presence, and the synagogue became a 'temple in miniature'. In so re-institutionalising Judaism, the rabbis found ample scriptural warrant. Hosea had spoken of offering 'our lips as sacrifices of bulls' (Hos. 14:2). Jeremiah had said, 'When I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices but I gave them this command: Obey Me and I will be Your God and you will be My people' (Jer. 7:22-23). These texts suggested, as Moses Maimonides was later to point out, that sacrifice was only the outer form of the essential transaction between man and God, which was the joining of will to will in human submission and self-transcendence.

The result of these transformations was, in effect, to democratise the sacred and make it accessible on equal terms to all. In a vestigial sense, the priesthood remained. There are *cohanim* today, and like their ancestors who served in the Temple, they can claim direct descent from the family of Aaron. Their special identity confers on them certain honours and restrictions. But

since the destruction of the Temple they have had no privileged leadership role. In the culmination of a process that had been gathering momentum throughout the second Temple period, leadership passed from priests to sages. And the sages traced their lineage from neither kings nor priests but from prophets.

The rabbinic conception of Jewish history is contained in a single sentence at the beginning of the Mishnaic tractate, *Avot*: 'Moses received the Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets; the prophets handed it on to the men of the Great Assembly ...' The history of Israel, from this perspective, is not a narrative of kings and power, nor one of priests and Temple ritual, but of prophets who sustain a continuous tradition from Moses to the Great Assembly and thence to the sages of the rabbinic academies.

This development had immense significance for Jewish spirituality. To quote Maimonides:

> Israel was crowned with three crowns - the crown of the Torah, the crown of the priesthood and the crown of kingship. The crown of priesthood was awarded to Aaron ... The crown of kingship was awarded to David ... The crown of the Torah, however, is for all Israel, as it is said: 'Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance of the congregation of Israel' (Deut. 33:4). All who wish may come and take it up. Do not suppose that the other two

> crowns are greater than the crown of the Torah, for it is said, 'By me [Wisdom or Torah] kings reign, and princes decree justice.' (Prov. 8:15). Learn from this that the crown of the Torah is greater than the two others. The sages stated that an illegitimate scholar has precedence over an ignorant High Priest. [9]

Anyone could wear the crown of the Torah. The sage was not a holy man. He had no special role in the life of worship. Indeed all hierarchies in the life of the spirit were now at an end. Anyone could pray; anyone could communicate directly and without mediation with God. Leadership had ceased to be ecclesiastical and had become educational.

What did this mean for atonement and salvation? There can be no more dramatic contrast than that between the answers given by Paul for Christianity and Rabbi Akiva for Judaism. Paul's answer, in the Epistle to the Romans, is this: The son of God has died, and through that sacrifice atonement has been brought to the world. Rabbi Akiva's answer is diametrically opposed. 'Happy are you, O Israel. Before whom are you purified and who purifies you? Your father in heaven.' [10] In Paul, atonement is still mediated, now not by a High Priest but by the son of God. To Rabbi Akiva, for whom all Israel were called the children of God, [11] atonement is *un*mediated. There is no intermediary, no intercessor, no one who atones other than the sinner himself or herself. By turning to God, God turns to

him or her in absolute immediacy and grants forgiveness.

Thus Christian theology preserved the concept of priesthood while Judaism did not. Biblical priesthood is undeniably a male institution. Priests were the sons, not the daughters, of Aaron. In appropriating the biblical tradition in the way it did, Christianity created a priesthood with a structural bias towards the male. Needless to say, the proponents of the ordination of women have an answer to this; but it involves, of necessity, a historical distancing from those texts. There is, in other words, a barrier to be overcome. Judaism has no such barrier because it did not continue the association between leadership and the priesthood, either in the synagogue (where the leader of prayer was a lay person) or in the academy (where the leader was not a priest but a sage).

Otherness

None of this is to signal that there is not a profound debate in Judaism about the role of women in the religious life. There is. Still less is it to evaluate the two faiths. That enterprise - the task of apologetics through the ages - is in principle impossible and ethically invidious. It is simply that the two debates - the Jewish and the Christian - are wholly distinct and each must be understood in its own terms, according to its own inner logic, in the two quite different languages of spirituality that they represent.

All three elements crucial to the debate in

Christianity - the ontological and functional difference between men and women, the theological difference arising from incarnation, and the difference in leadership role arising from the nature of priesthood - do not exist in Judaism. They do not exist because Judaism read Genesis 1-3 differently, understood revelation differently, and vested religious leadership in something other than priesthood. The differences are all the more striking in that the two religions share, in the Hebrew Bible, a canon of sacred scriptures, and that it is precisely these scriptures that generate the debate and serve as the points of departure for protagonists on all sides.

There is a lesson here of wider significance than the subject of women. A Mishnah in *Sanhedrin* states that 'When a treasurer mints coins in a single mint, all the coins are alike. God makes every human being in the same image - His image - but each is different.' [12] God lives not only in the detail but in the difference. The Bible, said the sages, commands us in one verse to love our neighbour, the one who is like ourselves; but in many verses it commands us to love the stranger, the one who is *not* like ourselves. The religious challenge is to discover God in otherness: *in the one who is in God's image even though he or she is not in our image.* That is the spiritual task between men and women. It is the task between humanity and God. It is the task, too, between different faiths, nations and ethnicities, and rarely more urgently than now.

John Hick has defined religious pluralism

as 'the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the real or the ultimate'. [13] I would describe this as a *Platonic* view of pluralism: that the differences between faiths merely mask an underlying unity. Somewhere beyond the concrete forms of the religious life is a realm in which all faiths are ultimately different expressions of the same thing.

I am not sure whether this is the most helpful way, practically or theoretically, of characterising our situation. The Hebrew Bible suggests an alternative. From Babel onward, human civilisation has been split into a multiplicity of languages, none of which is prior to any other, none of which is a spiritual Esperanto which encompasses them all. Until the final redemption, we live in a world of difference and conflict. Our task is to recognise that difference and negotiate conflict in such a way that we destroy neither others nor ourselves; and ultimately we cannot destroy others without destroying ourselves. In such circumstances what matters is less that the other is ultimately like us, but he or she may be utterly *un*like us and yet still be the image of God. God speaks to us as wholly Other, and one way of hearing God is to listen to the wholly other.

There is a verse in the Hebrew Bible which captures this truth beautifully and which sheds new light on the whole subject of men, women and the religious life. We tend to miss it because its nuance is lost in translation. It is this: When man in Eden

wakes from his sleep and sees for the first time the first woman, he says:

> Now I have found bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman [*ishah*] because she was taken from man [*me-ish*] (Gen. 2:23).

Ostensibly the verse says no more than that first there was man, then from man there was made woman. However the Hebrew text engages in a most subtle linguistic shift. There are two Biblical words for man: *adam* and *ish*. *Adam* ('that which was taken from the earth [*adamah*]' signifies a species: homo sapiens. *Ish* signifies an individual human personality. Throughout the narrative until this point, man has been called *adam*. This verse is the first occasion on which the man is called *ish*. The word *ishah*, 'woman,' appears in the Bible before the word *ish*, 'man.' Man pronounces the name of woman before he pronounces his own name as man. *Man must first discover the other before he discovers himself.* That was Adam's necessary journey of self-knowledge. I suggest it is ours.

References

[1] B. Sanhedrin 38a.

[2] Genesis Rabbah 8:12.

[3] B. Yevamot 63a.

[4] B. Niddah 45.

[5] Genesis Rabbah 8:10.

[6] B. Yevamot 62b.

[7] See, for a more nuanced view of the subject, Michael Wyschogrod, The Body of Faith, Minneapolis, Seabury Press, 1983; Jacob Neusner, The Incarnation of God, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1992.

[8] R. Moshe Feinstein, Responsa Iggerot Mosheh, IV, 49.

[9] Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah 3:1-2.

[10] Mishnah, Yoma 8:9.

[11] Mishnah, Avot 3:18.

[12] Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5.

[13] John Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, London: Macmillan, 1985, 91.

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