



RELIGIONS IN DIALOGUE | 14

Ephraim Meir

# Becoming Interreligious

Towards a Dialogical Theology from  
a Jewish Vantage Point

WAXMANN

# Religions in Dialogue

Series of the Academy of World Religions,  
University of Hamburg

No. 14

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Towards a Dialogical Theology  
from a Jewish Vantage Point



Waxmann 2017

Münster · New York

**Bibliographic information published by die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

**Religions in Dialogue, No. 14**

Series of the Academy of World Religions

ISSN 1867-1292

Print-ISBN 978-3-8309-3080-8

E-Book-ISBN 978-3-8309-8080-3

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Steinfurter Straße 555, 48159 Münster

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Cover Design: Pleßmann Design, Ascheberg

Cover Picture: alotofpeople / Fotolia.de

Setting: satz&sonders GmbH, Münster

Print: Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Printed on age-resistant paper, acid-free as per ISO 9706



Printed in Germany

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# Introduction

This book is the third one in a set of books that has interreligious meeting and theology as its theme. In a first volume, I outlined a novel conception of selfhood around the concepts of self-transcendence, self-difference and trans-difference.<sup>1</sup> My main argument was that subjectivity is intimately linked to alterity. Alterity inhabits the subject, even before its beginning. The human being becomes conscious of the-other-in-the-same, in a movement of passing to the other. More specifically, I perceived the religious I as in dialogue with others of the own group and of other groups. In the encounter that serves as the bridging between persons who preserve their differences and who respect the always ethical difference of the other, “trans-difference” becomes possible.

In a second monograph, I formulated a dialogical theology from a Jewish point of view.<sup>2</sup> I analyzed and critically discussed the writings of contemporary Jewish dialogical thinkers and argued that the values of interreligious theology are moored in their thoughts. I worked with categories such as proximity, attentive listening, translating, crossing borders and self-criticism.

The present work is a follow-up of the two preceding books. Some materials which appear here have previously been published. I thank Waxmann publishing house and ETS publishing house for giving me permission to use these recent materials, which have been thoroughly reworked in view of the present volume.<sup>3</sup>

After showing in an initial chapter what a great challenge lies before us with interreligiosity and “trans-difference,” I use the characteristics of Hassidic life, masterfully depicted and actualized by Martin Buber, in order to describe a way of becoming interreligious. I apply his religious insights to the field of interreligious meeting and dialogue. A third chapter deals with violence and peace in religions.

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1 E. Meir, *Dialogical Thought and Identity. Trans-Different Religiosity in Present Day Societies*, Berlin and Jerusalem: De Gruyter and Magnes, 2013.

2 Id., *Interreligious Theology. Its Value and Mooring in Modern Jewish Philosophy*, Berlin and Jerusalem: De Gruyter and Magnes, 2015.

3 E. Meir, “Da Nostra Aetate a Papa Francesco: una retrospettiva ebraica, in Dialogo interreligioso”; id., “Violence and Peace from a Jewish Perspective,” in Fernando Enns and Wolfram Weiße (eds.), *Gewaltfreiheit und Gewalt in den Religionen. Politische und theologische Herausforderungen* (Religionen im Dialog 9), Münster: Waxmann, 2015, pp. 277–284; id., “Die Relevanz moderner jüdischer Philosophie für interreligiöse Begegnungen als Dialog und als herausfordernder Appell. Eine Antwort auf Andreas Markowsky,” in Katjun Amirpur, Thorsten Knauth, Carola Roloff, Wolfram Weiße (eds.), *Perspektiven dialogischer Theologie. Offenheit in den Religionen und eine Hermeneutik des interreligiösen Dialogs* (Religionen in Dialog 10), Münster: Waxmann, 2016, pp. 131–139; id., “Kommentar zum Vorhaben einer dialogischen Theologie,” in id., pp. 345–354.

The next chapter contains a report on my interreligious teaching in the *Academy for World Religions* of Hamburg University during the summer semester of June–July, 2015. The Academy, headed by Prof. Wolfram Weiße, is for me a kind of laboratory, where I can test and refine my theological theories. In the same chapter, I also recount two interreligious talks in which I participated. A fifth chapter describes how my own thoughts are related to and inspired by pluralistic theologians. Embedded in the Jewish tradition, but well acquainted with Christian theology, I formulate in a sixth chapter some Jewish views on Christianity and critically discuss them. The seventh chapter contains my views on a dialogical hermeneutics, in discussion with an experimental interreligious dialogue that took place at the *Academy of World Religions*. It discusses a transformative, multi-perspective reading of religious core texts that function in the own, natural context as well as in the dialogical context of religious others. The final chapter offers some examples of (un)successful interpretations of religious texts and traditions.

This book is certainly not the last word on interreligious theology; it is a work-in-progress. I want to promote and advance dialogical theology from a Jewish point of view, since I believe that such a theology is a chance for shaping our identities in a positive way, in respect to and in dialogue with religious others. As the title of the present publication suggests, “becoming interreligious” is a process. In the course of this process, one has to avoid many pitfalls. Becoming interreligious appears to be an adventure. But it is far from being a luxury: it is a necessity in our more and more globalized, but less and less dialogical world. Religious others challenge us and allow us to reimagine and reconfigure our own religious singularity. The theme itself is actual. Gonzaga University, located in Spokane, Washington, for instance, has a lecture series called “Being Religious Interreligiously.” One of Peter C. Phan’s books is entitled *Being Religious Interreligiously*.<sup>4</sup> By choosing the title *Becoming Interreligious* for the present book, I put the emphasis upon being on our religious way in a never ending process of meeting religious others and learning from them.

With all our religious differences, we are linked to each other. It would be a mistake to absorb differences in an all-encompassing, collectivist unity, a universal, all-unifying religion. It would be another mistake to remain within the own and the particular, without recognition of the other. I love and live my Jewish specificity and, at the same time, recognize that religious others have their own fascinating path to salvation. It is not easy to understand the relation between the self and the other, the inner and the outer, the own and the strange; there are many viewpoints that have to be taken into account. But it is an adventure and a challenge that is worth undertaking.

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4 Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously. Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004. Peter Phan is an American Catholic theologian native of Vietnam and teaches at Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

From the start of this book, I would like to counter two objections. One could oppose my ideas on interreligious theology, arguing that in this new emerging discipline, based upon a praxis of meeting, the own gets lost. Nothing is less true. I cherish and love the own and even posit that this love may become greater, once one takes seriously the encounter with religious others. It is as with one's wife. One may meet many other women, but the relationship with one's own wife remains special. The love for her is personalized and there is no real love without personalization. In non-metaphorical words: travelling in a multi-religious world, getting acquainted with many worldviews, customs and rituals, does not diminish at all the love for the own religion, in which and from which one lives. We shape our identities, but are also shaped by others, intra-religiously and inter-religiously.

Another possible objection could be that I develop a kind of relativism, in which diverse contingent narratives stay one alongside the other. Yet, I think that only interaction and dialogues with religious others allow us to reach religious maturity. I do not believe in one objective, absolute, exterior perspective, but that does not imply that all is relative. The whirlpool of relativism comes to a halt once other people are hurt by our opinions or deeds. The common task of all religions to make a better world for all human beings is not to be relativized. I do not believe in the relativity of ethics, but I definitely believe in the relationality and interconnectedness of all human beings. This implies that no religion is self-sufficient and that religions are interdependent as varied paths and limited responses to the Ultimate.

A transformation takes place in becoming interreligious. In the course of this process, one gradually gets rid of one's monopolistic position and starts to perceive how other religious positions function as specific ways to the ultimate Reality. All these ways have their own rationale and legitimacy, and one may learn a lot from them. It is akin to leaving behind a monistic philosophy in favor of a philosophy that respects plurality. 'Everything' is not reducible to one *archè* or principle: water (Thales of Miletus), the *apeiron* (Anaximander), air (Anaximenes) or the spirit (Hegel). Breaking away from this reductive philosophy, one may start thinking in a pluralistic way about what is. In a parallel manner, leaving aside a theology that is exclusivistic makes the way free for a religious pluralism that respects and learns from differences.



## Chapter 1. The Necessity and Challenge of Interreligiosity

“Let all the nations walk each in the name of their God, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.”

(Micah 4:5)

“Beloved are human beings, for they are created in God’s image.”

(Rabbi Akiba in Pirke Avot 3:18)

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.”

(Hillel in Shabbat 31a)

### Choice

Every religion has elevated moments, great texts and golden epochs as well as moments of crisis and elements that bring discrimination and destruction and do not promote the dignity of all. In our time of growing religious fanaticism, extremism and terror, a critical attitude towards religion is called for. Religious people have to make choices. The awareness of the need of making choices constitutes the motive for writing this book. Yigal Amir murdered Yitzhak Rabin, but Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King brought about changes in society. After the turn of the millennium, we have witnessed religious terror and extremism, but also manifestations of trans-religious solidarity after terror attacks. We have the choice: to continue our traditional way of thinking in affirming our selves by devaluing others and in constructing hierarchies in which we ourselves are more or less at the top. Or, alternatively, we may define our own identity as positively related to people who live their religiosity in different ways. There is the choice between religious antagonism or religiously motivated peace building and peace keeping. The media play an important role in influencing the public. They often have religion and violence as their theme. Themes of interreligious understanding and peacemaking receive less attention. In TV debates, one hears stereotypes and generalizations, and fears are given free reign. Frequently, the media as opinion maker desires to attain popularity by creating or supporting stereotypes. Expressions of interreligious solidarity are often no news at all. Of course, it is unrealistic and insufficient to present one’s religion in an overtly idealistic way. Necessarily, one will have to deal with less positive or plainly negative expressions of one’s faith. Yet, what is reality, which is always hard, without a vision and a dream?

The choice is ours. Are we going to exclude others, with affinity only to what is the own? Or are we becoming conscious of our interconnectedness, starting to recognize that we live in *one* world and that our allegiance to a particular group

does not exclude our allegiance to all other human beings? Will we stick to those elements in our religions that humiliate others, marginalize them or exploit them, or will our religions contribute to liberation and human dignity? Will we look at other religions as less true or simply false, or will we adopt a more egalitarian vantage point?

## **New values**

Modern values of equality, democracy, human rights, women's rights and ecological concerns are slowly transforming religions. More and more women, for instance, want equality and contest the patriarchal structure of their religions. However, this positive evolution towards more equality between men and women is also feared by religious groups that see this movement as a threat to their identities and self-understanding. Can religion be separated from the secular? Can the values cherished in our civic societies be neglected in our religious life? My viewpoint is that religion cannot thrive without the secular. Religion and the secular are not at war with each other. Religion is another view of the world, vital for the world itself. Listening to prophetic voices could lead to a critical and constructive attitude towards social and political life.

## **A world-centered religiosity**

Modern Western states have a healthy division between church and state. They tend to diminish the role of religion in the public sphere and to delegate religion to the private sphere. However, religions have always had social dimensions and, in Western Europe, they are again very visible. In fact, religions were never a mere private matter; they have always aspired to influence the world. Religions influence secularity and the secular world with its values influences religions. The French secularism should not be anti-religious and religions should not control the politics of the state or be instrumentalized by the states. Cult and culture are frequently entangled, religious values and civic values can exist together. Identity should therefore not be reduced to state identity nor to religious identity. One may be a citizen and a religious person. The relation between the various identities may be more in favor of citizenship or in favor of religious affiliation. One may be engaged in the world and see this engagement as a holy task. If a professor of history starts praying in class instead of teaching or doing research in the synagogue instead of praying, a problem arises. Yet, there is no contradiction between living simultaneously in the world and before God's eye.<sup>5</sup> Certain societies are more

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<sup>5</sup> To illustrate this in another way: Leibowitz said that in the prayer for the ill, one does not take one medication less because one prays to God as "the medical doctor of the ill" (*rofe*

secular than others. In Western societies it would be best of if they search for a middle ground: not extreme sacralization, as in Iran and Pakistan where Islam is the state religion, and not anti-religious secularity, as in France where laicity is a kind of religion.

In a vision of a united world, we cannot continue to negativise others, segregating them and excluding them. The challenge of religions today is therefore to reform them in view of the creation of a world that does not repudiate and demean others, but approaches them with respect for their human dignity. Jewishly spoken: all have a divine spark, all are created in God's image. The temptation to reserve the truth and the good for ourselves, labeling the others who are not born into our fold still fascinates religious people. Are we going to accept and live religion "as it is" or "as it always has been," without critique and without questions? Or are we going to live our religion in view of its positive and healing impact upon social, economic and political life? Are we going to bring necessary changes or are we ready to defend and justify all that is written and repeat the failures of the past? The challenge of the day is to stand up against segregation and discrimination by bringing deeper layers of our traditions anew into the spotlight and reimagining our religious commitments in view of the challenges of today. Is it possible to find resources in our own tradition for "a good life for all," as Manuela Kalsky would formulate?<sup>6</sup>

Jonathan Sacks reminds us of some disturbing facts.<sup>7</sup> In his book *On the Dignity of Difference*, first published in 2002, he writes that it was estimated that the top 358 billionaires are together richer than half of the world's population. One-sixth of the world's population earns less than one dollar a day, with all the dire consequences that entails. Aid from developed countries for developing countries is extremely meager: only four countries – the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden – give 0.7 per cent of their national income to developing countries; America, the richest country in the world, gives only 0.1 per cent. Every year, more than eight million die because of polluted water or contaminated air. Six million (!!!) die from malnutrition or starvation. In Africa, of one thousand children only 174 reach the age of five. Sacks deems that the central insight of monothe-

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(*holim*). Under the influence of Hassidism, Buber wrote that a person does not have to leave the world, but to hallow it and perceive the divine presence in everything and through every pure deed. See M. Buber, "Mein Weg zum Chassidismus," in *Werke. Dritter Band. Schriften zum Chassidismus*, Munich and Heidelberg: Kösel and Lambert Schneider, 1963, p. 962.

6 In the summer of 2016, Manuela Kalsky and I offered at the Hamburg *Academy of World Religions* a seminar in which we invited professors from different religious traditions to contribute to a dialogical theology. Focusing upon our living together in a variety of ways, lecturers and students came in dialogue. Fittingly, Kalsky gave our seminar the title "A theology of the good life for all from a transreligious point of view."

7 J. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London: Continuum, 2007, pp. 106–107.

ism – that God created mankind – implies that we are all one family. On Pesach, Jews eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, and bitter herbs, in memory of their slavery. And on the festival of Succot, they live in huts, in memory of the life in the desert, as a reminder of how it feels to be without a home, exposed to the elements.<sup>8</sup> The festivals of Pascha and Succot are therefore not mere ceremonial acts; they engage the religious person to realize more equity and solidarity.

Religious people may defend the status quo. They may also interrogate present unjust situations by referring to core religious texts and rituals that promote the reverence to life. This is not about cherry picking in religion, but about rediscovering the deeper humanistic layers of our religions, that are important for mankind as such and not only for our own group. Instead of diminishing the worth of others, we could cultivate compassion for all in *tiqqun olam*, a “reparation of the world.”

Religions tend to separate people from the world, even to deny the world. They tend to radically separate “truth” from “reality,” which would have to be put aside. They are too full of themselves to be engaged in the world. By acting this way, a special sacred and autonomous space is created which is called “religious,” hermetically cut off from the world. Religion is banned to a domain outside daily life and God becomes a cult object. If we want our religions to be humanly relevant, they must function in our times, here and now. One of the Hassidic leaders, the Gerer Rebbe, opposed rejection of the world by asking: “Is this world yours that you can reject it?” And Martin Buber fulminated against Søren Kierkegaard, who situated the religious sphere – the domain where the individual arises –, above the ethical sphere as the sphere of the common.<sup>9</sup> I argue that one has to work hard in order to get rid of a religion that is irrelevant for our daily life and for the present social and political situation. At the same time, I firmly believe that religious insights could promote respect for human life and well-being for all.

Practically, many religions of course portray magical, ecstatic and gnostic features. The use of amulets, talismans, chanting incantations, and practicing alchemy; all these belong to religion. However, I am concentrating – with Buber and Levinas – on the kind of religious experience in which presence before and ethical openness to other human beings are central.<sup>10</sup> A human being becomes

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8 Id., p. 112.

9 M. Buber, “Gottesfinsternis. Betrachtungen zur Beziehung zwischen Religion und Philosophie,” in id., *Werke. Erster Band. Schriften zur Philosophie*, Kösel: Lambert Schneider, 1962, pp. 589–593.

10 For Buber, both magic that manipulates the higher reality in a childish way and gnosis that is mastery through secret knowledge threaten authentic religiosity. See M. Buber, “The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible,” in W. Herberg, *The Writings of Martin Buber*, New York: Meridian Books, 1974, pp. 260–262. Levinas opposes a numinous and sacred religiosity that violently transports man beyond his power and will, and stresses instead the freedom and education of a human being. E. Levinas, “A Religion of Adults,” in id., *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, London: Athlone, 1990 (hereafter DF), pp. 11–23.



human in relation to others, in care for nature and in relating to ideas with his entire person. It is marvelous when a person ‘passes’ to the other. Not in absolute separation from the world, but in relationship, one reaches the depth of being. A human being becomes human in cooperation, not in concurrence, in meeting and other-centeredness and not in self-interestedness. Becoming human is a complex process, but it is not out of reach: “For this commandment, that I command you today, is not too marvelous for you and not far away. It is not in heaven that you should say: ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, so that we hear it and do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say: ‘Who will cross the sea and bring it to us, so that we may hear and do it?’ This word is near to you, in your mouth and heart, that you may do it (*ki qarov elekha ha-davar me’od be-phikha u-bi-levavkha la’asot*)” (Deut. 30: 11–14).

## The question of belonging

The main question throughout this book is whether our identity is limited to our belonging to a specific group or whether our identity can be understood as belonging and being committed to all. The process of becoming interreligious in a rapidly pluralizing landscape is presented here as coming into interaction with religious others, in view of mending the world. I describe the process of becoming linked to religious others and becoming interreligious in the common search for justice and in the praxis of solidarity and mercy for all. The proposed meta-identical religious existence does not make our specific religious commitment superfluous; it puts it in the perspective of the broader religious movement that takes care of our world. I bring this forward in the conviction that our hearts are large enough to comprehend all living beings, take care of them and bring them out of suppression, slavery, poverty and misery in a mended society. Our belonging to a particular group or country is not opposed to our common commitment to the world as such. We may at the same time celebrate diversity and embrace the common good, preserve specificity and look for communalities.

In Hebrew the saying *qadma derekh erets la-Torah* expresses the idea that appropriate behavior and taking our belonging to the general society seriously takes precedence over our specific belonging and commitment to the own group. Moreover, learning in the own religious group and learning from other religious groups do not exclude each other. But this learning process in interreligious contexts is a paradigm change and it takes time until one accepts this new reality. It took time to adjust to the idea that we cognitively passed from a geocentric to a heliocentric universe. In a parallel way, it takes time until we gradually become aware that the transcendent is not approachable only through one religion or a cluster of religions. All religions are different apperceptions of the transcendent and therefore, all religions need each other. Openness to other religions is necessary, since others may perceive aspects of the transcendent that escape one in one’s own worldview.

Keenan has remarked that, for some people, interreligious encounter may lessen the engagement with and fervor for the own faith. He emphasizes that a decreased commitment and diminished devotion should not be the result of interfaith dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Becoming aware of our multi-cultural position is sometimes a disorienting shock for those who have lived mono-culturally.<sup>12</sup> But we have no choice: more and more, plural societies challenge us to become conscious that others are not only there to confirm us in our own faith and nesting culture. They are not merely present in function of the reaffirmation and deepening of the own faith tradition.<sup>13</sup> The goal of interreligious meetings is not only to become aware of what we do in our own faith and to reappropriate and deepen our tradition, but mainly to cultivate a non-discriminative and non-judgmental attitude towards religious others, to embrace religious diversity as an opportunity and to learn from all. We are located and particular in our traditions and at the same time we are at home in the house of the world, which consciously or unconsciously permanently influences us.

### **A different mindset: com-passion with others**

This book is the research of a search and in this sense, not value-free or without normativity. I am looking for an alternative to the “us *versus* them” or “insider-outsider” paradigm articulated by many. I formulate the possibility of a different mindset, a new way of thinking about the possibility of inter-being with (religious) others. Being critical of the own position is one of the prerequisites for the creation of such an inter-being. Another condition is the development of empathy for the other’s suffering. Such an empathy may lead to a catharsis and an exodus out of the self towards the other, in mercy and compassion. A third condition lies in the deep listening to the narrative of the other. In this way, a suspicious, tribal attitude to the other may be altered by respect for the other’s alterity through proximity to her. One’s spirituality lies in satisfying the needs of the other.<sup>14</sup> One may reach out to the stranger and be attracted by a divine voice that urges us to love the stranger,

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11 For the description of such a danger, see John P. Keenan, “The Promise and Peril of Interfaith Hermeneutics,” in Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (eds.), *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Interreligious Dialogue Series, 2), Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010, pp. 184–202, esp. 198–199.

12 Id., pp. 187–190.

13 Keenan (pp. 192–193 and 200–202) has a point in maintaining that interreligious meeting should not prevent people from living their own traditions. He cherishes the own and leans toward a pluralistic worldview, but he is less attentive to necessary changes that are the result of interreligious encounters. Keenan goes from the self to the other. However, there is also the movement from the other to the self.

14 DF, p. xiv.

since we know about oppression, having been strangers among others too (Lev. 19: 33–34). We may be joyful with the other’s joy and be near to her suffering.

A medical doctor told me that, as a student, he worked in a NYC hospital for children with cancer. He confided to his wife that, given the great suffering with which he was confronted, he would not be able to become a doctor. His wife replied that from the moment he would become insensitive to suffering, he would have to give up his plan and vocation of becoming a doctor. Compassion is perhaps the greatest of all human achievements: to be able to feel the pain of the other, to identify with it, to become conscious that all suffer and that we are linked to the suffering of any other human being. The suffering of the other can become a challenge for me to alleviate her suffering. In the Jewish tradition, Isaiah’s suffering Servant realizes the task of bearing the suffering of all other human beings: he feels responsible for the suffering in the world, and he is personally hurt if others are hurt. In sympathy, his heart becomes so large that he feels connected to the suffering of all. Popularizing the view of the suffering Servant, one could perceive every I – individual or collective – as a Messiah, as suffering the suffering of all others, until they are liberated.<sup>15</sup> As if their suffering was my own.

In Israel, it is an uneasy task to adopt the other’s suffering, to look at the conflict in which I am involved, so to say, from both sides. However, this may be necessary in order to see the other and to understand his suffering. The degree of our spiritual life can be measured by the attention to the other’s needs. The humanity of a society is palpable in the quantity of disabled people visible in our streets, in parks, in public buildings and in work situations. Also the Confucian “*ren*” as pliability or flexibility is of great help in order to see the other as a human being to whom we are related. If we delve enough into our traditions, we will find great spiritual treasures that alleviate the suffering of all.

Buddhists developed a great wisdom concerning the suffering of all sentient beings (*dukkha*). In their view, Bodisattvas help others to cope with suffering: they assist them in order to get rid of successive reincarnations (*samsara*) and to reach Nirvana. In their great wisdom, Buddhists wish all living beings not to suffer. They also wish that others may be happy and joyous.

## “Trans-difference”

In this volume, I try to learn from other religions and ways of life not solely with the aim of building a richer spirituality, in a kind of patchwork-religiosity that is the result of a superfluous, postmodern religious shopping. I rather try to see the link between religions, not by neglecting their differences, but by recognizing and valuing the differences and going beyond them in what I call “trans-

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<sup>15</sup> E. Levinas, “Messianic Texts,” in DF, p. 88.

difference.” In a previous book, I explained “trans-difference” as the possibility of making connections and contact with others, of communicating and bridging, notwithstanding differences, but thanks to them. If we were all the same, dialogue would be boring or, better: impossible. Because we live in *one* world, we are able to reach out to others, to feel with them and create a common world in favor of the good of all. I am trying to spell out the conditions for a fruitful dialogue between (religious) others, because this may contribute to the creation of a less violent world, in which peace is not an interruption of violence and war, but a way of turning to the other as sister or brother. Of the three ideals of the French revolution, the ideal of fraternity is the hardest to realize. The Westfalian peace treatise put an end to a bloody religious war, but its principle “*cujus regio, illius est religio*” is not applicable any more. Many West European cities are extremely diverse and in them the recognition of the other is necessary for social cohesion. Many more or less homogeneous groups are challenged by refugees. Frequently frictions between cultures arise. The indigenous population tends not to socialize with newcomers, who belong to ethnic minorities and feel victimized.<sup>16</sup> Non-recognition of the newcomers and their beliefs leads to alienation of the newly arrived, who may then radicalize themselves. Welcoming the other, whose belief is different, is the task of the day. In modern Western societies, all are entitled to believe what they want to believe, all are entitled also not to believe. The group of non-believers grows steadily and the number of people who give up their membership in religious institutions increases.

## The transcendent

One of the assumptions in interreligious thought is that if one is not linked to others one may miss important ways of living that are necessary for a full understanding of how humans organize themselves in view of what transcends their life and gives special meaning to it. There is a great diversity of communities

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16 Analysing the Dutch situation, Peter Schnabel writes on the Turkish and Moroccan migrant population, in which only one in seven or eight people feel primarily Dutch. In the second-generation, however, less than one third express a primary identification with Turkey or Morocco. They feel more and more Dutch. Most of the Turkish and Moroccan immigrants’ descendants feel primarily Muslim: Islam is their primary loyalty before their Dutch identity. On the other side, ethnic Dutch people do not socialize outside of their own group; they understand their identity “through a reverse mirror image of the things they dislike in the behaviors and attitudes of the newcomers.” Schnabel, “Immigration and Identity,” in Peter Harrington (ed.), *Essays on Integration and Participation*, London: Demos, 2008, pp. 29–34, esp. p. 33. In an alarming report, Ahmed Aboutaleb writes that more than half of Europe’s citizens fear that immigrants threaten their culture and take their jobs. He notes the indifference of the original Dutch population and the immigrant’s feeling of victimization. A. Aboutaleb, “Time to listen,” in *Essays on Integration and Participation*, pp. 37–40.

that strive to unlock the door to liberation and happiness. People live their life around the transcendent, the ineffable, called *nirvana*, *tao*, *Allah* or *Brahma*. The transcendent reality is higher than all the organizations and institutions that are created by humans who are interested in the transcendent. Perry Schmidt-Leukel concludes from this fact that the absolutization of the own view on the transcendent is problematic.<sup>17</sup>

The Jewish intrareligious pluralist model of the *mahloqet*, the diversity of opinions, could be broadened to the interreligious field: all are sibling religions. Practitioners of a future-oriented dialogical theology may not first of all look at the core content of different religious traditions, but at their dialogical potential. In the interreligious discourse, attitudes, not standpoints, are primordial. By taking this step, we do not become necessarily border-liners, *Grenzgänger*. We rather consciously cross borders, host others and are hosted by them in the consciousness that every religion and indeed every religious being is different and has something special to contribute to the broader world.

### Uniqueness, communication and “trans-difference”<sup>18</sup>

In his article significantly entitled “Confrontation,” the orthodox Rabbi Soloveitchik contended that the I is separated from the other and that the own religion is unavailable to the other.<sup>19</sup> There would be incommensurability of the own and incongruity with others. He defended the uniqueness of the Jewish narrative, which remains incommunicable, unavailable to others, declaring that in Judaism, there is something distinctive that remains incomprehensible to the outsider. Soloveitchik deems that the Jewish faith is not comparable to other faiths and that Jewish people are lonely in their uniqueness. Their singularity separates them from others. Such an attitude would make existential unions impossible. Playing on the words *ezer ke-negdo*, “a helper as his partner” in Gen. 2:18, Soloveitchik explains the expression differently from the accepted meaning.<sup>20</sup> He comments that the other is *ezer*, a helpmate, but also *ke-negdo*, different and opposed. The Jewish faith community is unique and incomprehensible for the outsider; it is a covenantal relationship with *halakha* (Law), without a common denominator with others. Only in the recognition of their incommensurability can two faith communities meet each other. In the same vein, Adam and Eve communicated solely thanks to God. This is the position of Soloveitchik, a prominent

17 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen. Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005, pp. 491–492.

18 I am thankful to my student Tanya White, who wrote a seminar paper on the subject of Soloveitchik’s, Greenberg’s and my own attitude towards other religions.

19 Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (1964), 5–29.

20 In Genesis 2:18, God creates for Adam “*ezer ke-negdo*,” a helper as his partner.

figure in the Jewish orthodox world. However, Soloveitchik also gave individuals like David Hartman special permission to engage in interreligious dialogue. I have this from David Hartman himself, who proudly engaged in interreligious dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

In his book *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, Irving Greenberg, a pupil of Rabbi Soloveitchik, developed another paradigm.<sup>22</sup> Embracing a kind of pluralism, he recognizes plurality, but maintains his own truth system. For him, the Absolute allows the existence of diverse and even contradicting faiths. This is a shift from a Newtonian universe with only one center point, to an Einsteinian one in which many center points exist. Not one system, but different systems exist. Many truths coexist. For Greenberg, both Judaism and Christianity are God's will. Along with Alice and Roy Eckardt, he wants to purge Christianity from supersessionism, claiming that no one has monopoly on the divine revelation. In the encounter, one gets richer through the other's faith; one may even reinterpret and reimagine the own religion in the interfaith encounter. Greenberg deems that "God has many messengers" and that there is a "universal divine covenant with humanity."<sup>23</sup>

As for me, faith experience is about the Ineffable, and precisely because of that, we can communicate. There is dissimulation, distinctiveness, irreplaceability and at the same time interconnection and real meeting in a life around the Absolute. Both belong together. I accept difference with Soloveitchik and bridges with Greenberg. Yet, I do not side with classical pluralism, but with real religious interaction, in which the I in dialogue with the religious other returns to himself and does not remain unchanged. Soloveitchik could not engage in interfaith dialogue; Greenberg can. Greenberg's view on the relationship between religions, however, is rather limited, involving only social and political cooperation: they work side by side, autonomously, but they are not in interaction on the religious level.<sup>24</sup> I think interfaith dialogue is necessary, since there is no self without the other. I

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21 See further E. Meir, "David Hartman on the Attitudes of Soloveitchik and Heschel towards Christianity," in J.W. Malino (ed.), *Judaism and Modernity: The Religious Philosophy of David Hartman*, Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2001, pp. 253–265. In his theology, Hartman was against absolutizing the own particular revelation: God, who created the world, was above faith communities. Hartman based his religious pluralism on creation, with its universal ethics of the sanctity of life. See Sandra B. Lubarsky, "Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought," in David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, pp. 111–129, esp. 118–122.

22 Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2004.

23 Id., "Judaism and Christianity: Covenants of Redemption," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, Michael A. Digner (eds.), Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000. 141–158, pp. 155 and 158.

24 Sandra B. Lubarsky, "Deep Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Jewish Thought," p. 118, n. 23.

work with the notion of “self-transcendence,” not with an isolated I, but with an I that reaches out to the other. As a result, “self-difference” is discovered as the recognition of alterity in the I. Differences exist, but also the possibility of “trans-difference.” Against Soloveitchik, I claim that the I is not that isolated and that the other is not necessarily threatening. Interreligious dialogue and mutual translation of worldviews are more than a possibility; they are the demand of the day. We learn from others in interreligious dialogue. It is not about curiosity, but about communication and meeting.

From Soloveitchik I learn respect for difference, for the ineffability of the human being with her unassimilable otherness. With Greenberg I share a clear pluralism. In “trans-difference,” respect for the own and attention to the other go together. Meeting the other implies not first of all knowledge as cognition, but foremost recognition, deep listening, learning, hospitality, bridging and translating. I combine uniqueness with communication and bridging. The discovery of enriching elements in other religions may eventually lead to a revision and even a reimagining or recreating of the own tradition, which does not have to lead to syncretism, although I am not as afraid of the word as those who restrict themselves to and enclose themselves in their own truth.

It is good to be at home in a religion that offers the intimacy of family and a common experience and language, but to be a guest in the home of others can also be a refined experience that is inspirational for the (re)arrangement of one’s own home. One may love and enjoy one’s own home and be aware, at the same time, that one’s home is not the entire town. Doors have a double function: to close and to open. Both functions are necessary and vital.

## Distinctiveness and covenantality

In her book *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics and Theologies of Relationality*,<sup>25</sup> Marcia Pally offers an ontology that combines interconnectedness with the unique value of each person. Her ontology aims at producing a political and economic ethics that avoids all-absorbing unity as well as too much self-congratulation. She brings together relation and the distinction of particular beings. The thesis that pervades this book like a red thread is that we become our distinct selves in relation to others. To her ontology, Pally adds a theological narrative and this is of particular interest for my own project. Her theology of relationality comes close to my work in which the concept of “trans-difference” is central.

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25 M. Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics and Theologies of Relationality*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2016. I reviewed this book in *Religious Studies Review* 42:4 (2016), 271.

Pally's non-denominational, mainly "Abrahamic" standpoint allows readers from various denominations to find inspiration each from her own tradition for a beneficial political and economic reality. She moves with ease and flexibility from one set of religious thoughts to another. She deems that religious understanding follows from the accumulation of perspectives and from the self-correction of one's own point of view. For her, traditions are necessary, but they change and need correction. I agree with her that this is an unending task that is not easily fulfilled, since one is embedded in a normative tradition; at the same time, one is oriented towards a present and a future, which are not less important than the past.

Notwithstanding her non-denominational standpoint, Pally prefers ibn Sina's "distinction" between the One source and everything else: there is one source of divine unity, called in the Muslim parlance: *tawhid*, radical otherness, that is nonetheless intuited. The apophatic, negative theologies are combined with an of-a-kind-ness. Moses, she deems, only sees God's back, not directly, in an of-a-kind-ness. There are traces of God, one partakes in God, but not as in the emanationist theory of the third-century philosopher Plotinus. For Pally, God as the self-expressing being is distinct from the human being, but "inherent" in all. She thinks of distinctness and relationship as existing together, in her ontology and in her theological narrative. She maintains that human beings are caused by God: they are in God's image, *be-tselem Elohim* (Gen.1:27). There is something common with God, a relationality with the ethics of *demuth Elohim* (the resemblance with God), a moral correspondence. But here is also *analogia entis*: the participation in God is different in particular beings. Pally finds the two movements in Augustine: he wrote about God's alterity as *maior dissimilitudo* and about an of-a-kindness as *tanta similitudo*.

Pally is a liberal thinker, who likes Locke's saying: "Everyone should do what he in his conscience is persuaded to be acceptable to the Almighty." Her view of the truth as emerging from the poly-interpretability of reality comes close to my own trans-different, dialogical theology, in which the apophatic character of the Ultimate opens a horizon to the lived truth in various religious lifestyles. Pally's thinking on the multiple ways to God was intimated half a millennium ago by Nicholas of Cusa, who thought that through the senses, reason, science, religion and love we know in complementary ways. Nicholas of Cusa promoted interactive listening to other points of view. The plurality of perspectives was not reduced and the manifold ways of knowledge were not confined to mind, as Kant claimed. I will come back to Cusanus's revolutionary thinking.

Referring to the saying that the Torah has seventy "faces" or interpretations, Pally claims that the plenitude of truth surmises a multiplicity of persons who are approaching the truth. In her theology, everybody has her or his own way to God and this does not contradict the idea of the covenant as reciprocal concern. Her standpoint is that only God knows the truth and therefore one shall not be judgmental when it comes to the belief of others. She refers to Levinas's idea of the



plenitude of truth,<sup>26</sup> that is constituted from the contribution of a multiplicity of persons, and to Sack's idea that "Truth emerges from the [...] process of letting our world be enlarged by the presence of others who think, act, and interpret reality in ways radically different from our own."<sup>27</sup> In Jewish tradition, she remarks, God takes Abraham to see the "stars" outside the tent, outside his limited perspective. This is a splendid idea that is fruitful for a dialogical, interreligious theology.

I feel close to Pally's ideas of multiple ways to God and of the necessity of uniting freedom, individuality, and distinctiveness together with interconnectedness, situatedness or covenantality.

## Inspiration from Buber and Levinas

In my own thinking, I am foremost inspired by Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber. One could object that Levinas does not contribute to interreligious discourse, since his absolute Other never becomes a concrete neighbor with a concrete identity, and that, therefore, his concept of alterity is not easily applicable to the interreligious encounter. Yet, Levinas does not talk about an absolute, abstract other. He rather describes the epi-phenomenon or "epiphany" (revelation) of an absolute call in a concrete person. This call is infinite, and therefore it cannot be completely absorbed by the I and never be adequately responded to. Marianne Moyaert claims that we do not learn much from Levinas concerning knowledgeable identity.<sup>28</sup> This is true, but my point is that Levinas did not intend to write about particular belonging, but about belonging to all as meta-identity, which does not exclude concrete identity. I adopt Levinas's ethical viewpoint and deem it extremely valuable for every interreligious dialogue, which does not have to be limited to theologians and other academicians.

The well-known elephant story, in which blind people touch only parts of the elephant and claim that what they feel is the entire elephant, is a welcome remedy for (groups of) people who think that they know the entire elephant. Nobody can claim to have the absolute truth. Levinas's alterity ruptures totality.

The works of Levinas and Buber put relationship in the center of their thought. Each in his own way developed a philosophy that is nourished by the Jewish tradition and that brought us new perspectives on coexistence, cooperation, and peace

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26 E. Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" in id., *Beyond the Verse. Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, transl. G. Mole, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 133–134.

27 J. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 23.

28 See M. Moyaert, "In Response to the Religious Other: Levinas, Interreligious Dialogue and the Otherness of the Other," in R. Burggraeve (ed.), *The Awakening to the Other: A Provocative Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*, Louvain: Peeters, 2008, pp. 161–190.