

SHARING SACRED HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

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“Zion will be redeemed through justice, and those who return to her through compassion.”

Isaiah 1:27

Until now most Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been jealous rivals competing for Divine favor. We have been like long-distance runners in a spiritual marathon over centuries, believing that only one competitor could earn the first-place medal while the others would either lose in disgrace or qualify for an inferior prize. How much evil and suffering have been caused by such theological self-glorification? None of our traditions has been innocent in this regard. We have all succumbed, at one time or another, to spiritual arrogance and blindness. In our present situation, with religious extremism engendering the slaughter of innocents and ideologies to justify such atrocities, we all need to acknowledge our past failings and approach our fellow believers, whose theologies differ from our own, with humility and repentance.

At the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, where I have taught for many years, Fr. Thomas Stransky resides after serving as rector there. Fr. Tom is an American Paulist priest. He uses a striking metaphor to illustrate the problem of how the three Abrahamic faiths developed in mutual estrangement, each convinced of its own triumphal truth. His image, which I shall embellish a bit, is of a “holy rocket” launched by God to bridge the gap between earth and heaven, between our present woundedness and the fulfilled promise of Divine healing.

We Jews believe that the “flight plan” for this holy rocket was revealed at Sinai, as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. In this flight plan, revealed in Hebrew, the trajectory takes the Jews from that smoking and thundering mountain into the air, but not outside the earth’s gravitational pull (for we Jews are a very down-to-earth, practical people). The rocket travels in a small arc just a few hundred kilometers north and lands in Jerusalem. Jews throughout history have been pilgrims on the road from Sinai to Jerusalem, too often a *via dolorosa* of suffering for us. But in the messianic future, we reassure ourselves, the rest of humanity will ascend to Jerusalem to join us there, learning Hebrew in an *ulpan* language course in order to study Torah with us and to appreciate that we were the carriers of the true revelation all along.

Next came Christianity, which proclaimed that a new flight plan had been revealed through Christ, this time in Greek. According to this new understanding, the original rocket launched at Sinai was, in fact, a *two-stage* vehicle. The first stage, Israel of the flesh, had fulfilled its intended function; but the thrust of Divine energy had now been passed to the second stage of the rocket, the spiritual and true Israel, namely the Church. Moreover, the new flight plan contained a mid-course correction. The rocket's new trajectory took the second stage out of the earth's gravitational field into outer space, where the celestial Jerusalem awaited the pilgrim who wanted to meet the Divine in the devotional heart, not in a particular land or city. The Church declared that one day the whole world would be on board the second stage, including the Jews, and in the meantime those people who chose not to join the Christian fellowship would suffer the consequences of their refusal—either in this world as accursed wanderers, or in the metaphysical realm of hell, or both.

After another six centuries, yet a third monotheistic tradition emerged, this one also laying claim to the earlier prophecies and promises while affirming a new flight plan for the holy rocket. Islam saw itself as the final stage of a *three-stage* rocket. In the eyes of Muslim believers, the Arabic text of the Holy Qur'an now offered the truest version of the vehicle's trajectory, as global in scope as that of Christianity, but with this-worldly criteria of holiness similar to those of the Jews. On the way to the Day of Judgment, the caliphate on earth would be the realm of Divine dispensation, with the Islamic *umma* (community) now acting as the vanguard carrier of Divine revelation. According to the new flight plan, Muslims were now at the controls of the rocket, with Jews and Christians already on board as believers to be protected, not condemned, by the dominant Muslim majority. Islam would eventually spread to cover the earth, by persuasion if possible and by force if necessary.

One can argue over which of these flight plans has caused more harm to other communities throughout history. (In my view, this has been largely a matter of political empowerment more than intent). What is undeniable is that all three of the flight plans are self-centered and self-glorifying. Equality among the three faith traditions, grounded in a pluralistic or inclusive theology, is not held out as a goal to be sought. Divine truth and love go together, both limited by some scarcity principle—an odd restriction to ascribe to the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. At the end of time, according to each of the three faiths, one and only one community will “win” the marathon of sacred history and be vindicated.

This paradigm of exclusive truth and hierarchical dispensation is in need of radical overhaul. If religion is to be a force for good, for life, for blessing, it must undergo a metamorphosis, a real *metanoia*, and become a force for inclusive, truly unconditional, love. This is not a defense of relativism. It is, instead, a recognition of pluralism within the monotheistic family. The one God of History has chosen to reveal the same essential

message in different languages or symbol systems, through different messengers at different times. If the adherents of those traditions would focus more on godly (i.e., just and compassionate) behavior toward others, rather than on demonstrating their supremacy over them, surely God's Name would be more genuinely glorified by the faithful and the face of religion would be more attractive to skeptical nonbelievers.

In order to realize this aim, a new paradigm must be found. One Biblical image that could be acceptable to all three monotheistic traditions is that of the rainbow revealed to Noah after the flood, as a sign of the covenant between God and all humanity (whatever sub-covenants may come later). A rainbow is a panoply of colors, none more beautiful than another, and the whole spectrum having a beauty greater than that of any single color. And what is the source of this aesthetic wonder? It is the refraction of white light through the prism of the earth's atmosphere.

The parallel for our consideration is this: the "white light" of Divine Truth is refracted through the prisms of historical experience, human language and culture, and subjectivity of thought and feeling. Yet despite these particularities, the general thrust of the Abrahamic faiths is the same: love and serve God through acts of justice and compassion toward other human beings (as well as other creatures). Creed is tested through deed, doctrine through practical discipleship, devotion to God through attending to the needs of our neighbors. Or, as one Hasidic rabbi has taught, "we should care about the welfare of other people's bodies and our own souls, rather than the reverse."

We have to be in constant dialogue with our neighbors in order to know when we might say or do something that is hurtful to them. In our global village, ignorance is no longer an excuse for insensitivity or injury. Before we profess love and concern for them, let us invite our neighbors to tell us what hurts them, so that we can live the Golden Rule with conscious intent, not just pay lip service to it.

To connect this reflection to current events, I will shift my focus from sacred history to sacred geography. I have lived in Israel/Palestine, or the "Holy Land," for 25 years. My home has been in Jerusalem, Al-Quds to the Muslims. What I have to offer, out of my own faith understanding, is a meditation on what I call the pluralistic geography of Jerusalem. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all consider the city to be holy, and they relate to it in iconographic, meta-historical terms. With its four quarters, Jerusalem has been likened to a human heart, with its four chambers. It is indeed a sacred heart, beating to the rhythm of ancient traditions and pumping vitality through the spiritual bodies of all believers in the One God of History. But there are also signs of "cardiac disease" in Jerusalem, with the flow of people and cultural energy from one community to another chronically blocked. The barriers of ignorance, fear, and hostility severely hamper the organic functioning of the Holy City. Beyond the local pathologies, the conflict over Jerusalem/Al-Quds between Israelis and Palestinians threatens to explode into a regional conflagration with horrific suffering for everyone.

If we hold onto the image of Mother Jerusalem as a shared heart, both holy and diseased, a healing path to justice and peace may lead through her varied geography:

The ecumenical “Christian Quarter” resonates with the diversity of Christian life in Jerusalem over the centuries. I will leave it to Christians to decide whether this diversity is a positive sign of plurality within the Christian fold or whether the separate chapels within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre signify a tragic fragmentation, a brokenness in the Body of Christ.

One Christian community has a quarter all its own: the Armenians. They were the first people to embrace Christianity as a national faith in the year 301, a decade before Constantine’s rise to power. The Armenians are a deeply devout people, and their small Jerusalem community of about 1500 revolves around the ornate Cathedral of St. James. When one considers the distinctiveness of Armenian Christians and then juxtaposes their story with those of the Israelis and Palestinians in the adjacent Jewish and Muslim Quarters, a pattern with a significant message emerges.

These three peoples—the Armenians, the Jews, and the Palestinians—are rooted in the Holy Land for centuries through their respective traditions. One common aspect of their religious heritages is a three-fold loyalty: to a people, to a faith tradition, and to a particular land. (For the Jews and Palestinians that land is the same, Israel/Palestine, while for the Armenians the holy homeland is Armenia).

On the level of the physical body, all three national communities have endured traumatic massacres: first the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks before and during World War I; then we Jews passed through the Valley of Death during World War II; and since then the Palestinians have suffered massacres perpetrated by virtually every other Middle Eastern people they have encountered. The Palestinian experience of displacement, dispossession, and occasional massacres can not be objectively compared with the genocide of the Armenians or of the Jews; yet a subjective sense of being survivor peoples, mourning their martyrs and affirming their communal dignity in the face of existential threat, does characterize all three national-religious communities.

The three peoples share yet another common denominator: all have suffered, in the 20th century, exile from their respective homelands. This is more an assault to the spirit than to the body. We Jews, of course, know what it means to be refugees, “strangers in a strange land,” for close to 2500 years. Psalms 137 and 126 are ample testimony to the Jewish experience of exile and return. Now if, in this 21st century, we have been blessed to return once again to Jerusalem as a free people, and we rejoice over that homecoming as a central part of our destiny as Jews, while the Armenian and Palestinian peoples are suffering the pain of their own diasporas, there must be some lesson in this fateful

intermingling of joy and sorrow, a lesson that is neither fatalistic nor deterministic, but, instead, points to a hopeful healing of our historic traumas.

One image that conveys the shared experience is of three abused and fearful individuals walking through darkness, holding flickering candles lit by their ancestors long ago to illuminate their way. Each of the three wanderers longs for the security of his lost homeland and for the chance to define himself again in positive terms after being defined negatively by others for so long. Each of them fears that, out of the darkness, some enemy will attack, making him a victim once again. None of the three is able to trust others who might help him overcome the trauma and the dread.

Then, suddenly, the three figures converge, and their candles illuminate each other's faces. Each experiences the *shock of mutual recognition*. In the human faces is a reflection of something mysteriously Divine, so that each can echo the wondrous exclamation of the wounded Jacob, renamed Israel upon uniting with his estranged brother Esau: "For I have truly seen Your face as though seeing the face of God." (Gen. 33:10).

An awareness of the Divine aspect of each other's identity would help us overcome our conditioned fears, loyalties, and animosities. The underlying, liberating truth is that the one Creator has made us all in the Divine Image, every person being infinitely precious and beloved in God's sight. Here on earth, our common forefather Abraham/Ibrahim and our mother city Jerusalem/Al-Quds make all of us sisters and brothers in the family of believers. If we could recognize one another in that spirit, even while dialoguing about distinct identities and vocations, we could work together to sanctify God's Holy Land and the entire creation, sharing the Divine blessing of *Shalom*."