

**JOURNEY OF THE HEART TO GOD:
REFLECTING ON THE ONENESS OF
GOD IN THE YEAR OF THE FATHER**

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In the final year of preparation before the Great Jubilee Year 2000, we are asked to devote ourselves to "broadening the horizons of believers so that they will see things in the perspective of Christ" (TMA 49). Thus Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter on the approach of the third millennium, designated the year 1999 to be "the year of God the Father." Jesus addressed God as "Father in heaven," (cf. Mt. 5:45) and gave us a simple yet appealing example of how to pray (Mt. 6, 9-13; Lk. 11:2-4). Jesus' life is the prototypical "journey to the Father," beckoning us to accompany him through repentance and conversion, hardship and endurance, insight and faith along the pilgrimage to fulfillment and final rest in God. In 1999, we especially take notice of our companions on the journey, beyond our immediate Christian brothers and sisters, of those of other faith traditions whom we encounter daily along the way.

Therefore, the Catholic Church's commitment to interreligious dialogue will be in evidence in this third preparatory year for the Jubilee. The pope writes about interreligious events for 1999, "in this dialogue the Jews and Muslims ought to have a pre-eminent place." He asks for God to grant the grace for joint meetings in places of significance for the great monotheistic religions. Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the one God who raised up Abraham for each of us as a model of faith, who has spoken through prophets and his chosen ones from ancient times and whose message to us through these spokespersons bears a strong moral imperative to act with justice and kindness and to serve God in all that we say, do and think.

Jews, the Oneness of God, God as Father

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. You shall love God with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole mind" (Dt. 6:5). This verse opens the Shema ("Hear"). It is one of the central passages in the Hebrew Bible and is inscribed in the tiny scroll encased in the mezuzah affixed to the doorway of the home of every pious Jew, as the biblical text itself commands. It is presented by the author of Deuteronomy as the interpretation of the essence of the Ten Commandments, the giving of which is narrated in the previous chapter. So it was not coincidental that when Jesus was asked which was the greatest of the commandments God had given to the Jewish people, his response was typically Jewish.

Acknowledgment of the Oneness of God is linked in Judaism to love of God, so much so that the Bible dares to

imagine the relationship of God to the Jews to be like that of lovers (Song of Songs) or man and wife in a monogamous marriage. For Judaism, God's Oneness connotes the uniqueness of the Divine (there are no other gods or goddesses) as well as God's absolute inner simplicity. For Jews, therefore, the affirmation that God is One not only precludes pantheons of deities found in other ancient religions but also the understanding of God's inner nature that we Christians proclaim in the doctrine of the Trinity. Jews can accept that we Christians sincerely believe in the One God, who is, after all no God other than the God of Israel. But they feel as well that a Trinitarian formulation of monotheism can only detract from the simplicity of faith that lies at the heart of Judaism. In their dialogues with Jews, Christians should choose their words about God carefully to safeguard this common belief in the one God.

God is also frequently imaged in the Hebrew Scriptures as a loving Father or Mother, nurturing and protecting the child, Israel. So to Jews the phrase, "Son of God," would connote, not an individual, but the whole People of God, called into being by God as a parent is responsible for the birth and therefore very existence of the offspring.

It is not common in the Hebrew Bible for prayers to address God as Father or Mother, however. This intimate form of prayer appears to have been developed in synagogues. Indeed, one of the oldest synagogue prayers still in use in modern synagogues is ascribed to Rabbi Akiba from the early second century and is called, after its first words, the Avinu Malkenu ("Our Father, Our King") and consists of a series of petitions such as that for food. Again, when Jesus was asked to pray, he drew from his own Jewish tradition to bring together several classical Jewish prayers into one. Just as "give us this day our daily bread" evokes the Avinu Malkenu, so "hallowed by thy Name" evokes the Kaddish (Holy is the Name). Every element of the Our Father thus has close parallels in synagogue worship, which may be why Christians feel so spiritually comfortable there. It is the source for much of what is essential in Christian liturgy and prayer. In this as in so many ways, Pope John Paul II touched upon profound truth in 1986 during his visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome when he called Jews our "elder brothers" in the faith. From the Church's point of view, Jews are indeed "family" brought into being by the same divine Father. Not all Jews would embrace easily the image of family when speaking about Christians though they would promote an understanding of the brotherhood of humanity imaged in the Torah in God's covenant with Noah.

The Same God

When Pope John Paul II addressed tens of thousands of Muslim youths in Casablanca, he straightforwardly declared: "We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection." Let there be no remaining reluctance for Christians to acknowledge that Muslims worship the same God. Allah is not another God nor the name of the God whom Muslims distinctly worship; Allah is the God, "Elohim" in the Hebrew bible, Elah in the Aramaic used by Jesus. This insight, though, is but a doorway on the path to mystery. The oneness of God is as much a mystery to us as why it is that God chooses a variety of ways to speak to us.

When we Christians address God as "Father," we mean that God is the source of all being whom Jesus encouraged us to address intimately when we pray. For Muslims too, the first element of their message about Allah is that God is the Creator. This they have preserved as the first point in the

first revelation to Muhammad: “Recite: in the Name of thy Lord who created...” (Qur’an 96:1). It is repeated many times in the Qur’an: “He is God, Creator, Maker, Fashioner; His are the most excellent Names” (Q. 59.24).

The Creator is no hidden God, and cognizance of God’s almighty lordship gave rise to an enumeration of names, ninety-nine by traditional count: “God! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting and Watcher and Guardian over all being...All-high, All-glorious...Patron...” (Q 2:255-7). In the minds of Muslims, these attributes of God are so staggeringly incomparable to what we encounter in our everyday lives that they are reluctant to count so common a title as “father” among the divine names. “No human perception comprehends Him, while He comprehends all perception; He is beyond all conceiving, the One who is infinitely aware” (Q 6.103). The Qur’an also contains many admonitions that God does not beget nor is begotten, and Muslims view their revelation as a correction of the Torah and the Gospel.

Muslims have been suspicious of Christians for using the names of the Father and the Son, and Christians at times have misperceived Muslims as being awestruck by God’s greatness beyond any human approach. Actually Muslims and Christians should look beyond their polemics to appreciate how very close they are in their understanding of God and the divine capacity to draw us to the truth. By sharing our perspectives on the oneness of God and the divine origin of all that is and can be known, we can enhance our understanding of God’s action in our pilgrimage of faith to the one divine goal: “Verily God knows the hidden things of the heavens and the earth; verily He has full knowledge of all that is in our hearts” (Q 35:38). Muslims remind Christians that intimacy and respect can be conveyed through a variety of images: “It is God who takes your souls by night and has knowledge of all that you have done all day...” (Q 6.60). Muslims and Christians also look upon themselves as graced by God’s goodness: “Your Lord is rich in grace toward mankind, but most of humanity gives no thanks; your Lord knows the secrets of their hearts as well as everything they openly reveal; there is not a hidden thing in heaven or on earth which is not within a Book where all is crystal clear” (Q 28.73-5).

Other Religious Communities

In the circle of believers around the church, Jews and Muslims have a pre-eminent place. The final year before the Jubilee Year will offer an opportunity to attempt, for some perhaps for the first time, trilateral conversations among the “Abrahamic faiths.” There are other companions of faith whose perspective on the one great reality of God can also be an enriching gift in the sharing of perspectives through interreligious dialogue in the year of the Father. The first peoples of our land, the Native Americans, whose numerous spiritual traditions are expressed in dozens of languages and reflect a multitude of spiritual visions and understandings, can join us in nearly every city and county of our land to speak of their journeys along the way of their ancestors. Buddhists are also now numerous in the United States, representing the complete variety of schools and practices of Buddhists throughout the world. Though Buddhists do not speak of “God” or of “Father,” they certainly understand our language of conversion and transformation, of effort and purification, and of insight and understanding along the road to fulfillment and unity in the one God. Hindus, who more often than not give at least intellectual priority to the one divine source or high God overlooking our lives and drawing us to perfection, are increasingly visible in our cities with their centers of worship and community life. Interreligious

dialogues in 1999 can be bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral depending upon our needs, abilities, and resources.

The Jewish Community in the U.S.

There are approximately six million Jews in the United States. Perhaps two-thirds maintain formal religious affiliation. The two largest groups are Reform and Conservative Judaism, the latter having broken off from the former in order to take on a more traditional observance of the commandments given by God to Israel as interpreted by rabbinic teaching over the centuries. About evenly divided, these two groups, along with the much smaller but disproportionately significant Reconstructionist movement (a liberal offshoot of Conservative Judaism which emphasizes Judaism as a civilization) together make up approximately 90% of religiously affiliated Jews in America. Orthodox Judaism, the strictest in its adherence to rabbinic *halachah* (law) comprises the rest. While, like Reconstructionism, Orthodoxy is disproportionately influential, it is itself beset by internal dissent between modern Orthodox and those of more strict observance.

Each of the movements has major seminaries, and American Jewry can boast some very fine institutions of higher learning such as Brandeis University and Yeshivah University. These, along with departments and centers of Jewish studies at secular and even Catholic universities such as Seton Hall in New Jersey, provide an institutional strength for Jewish-Christian dialogue on the highest academic levels. Like Catholics, Jews see themselves as an immigrant group and hold many social values, such as a strong family life, as well as religious and moral values in common with Catholics. These can be explored fruitfully on the local level in dialogues designed to reflect upon the meaning of what is, for Jews as well as Catholics, the 2000th anniversary of the beginning of Jewish-Christian relations.

The American Muslim Community

There are probably also six million Muslims in the United States, though estimates vary considerably. Most cities and towns now have a mosque or Islamic center. African-Americans Muslims constitute the largest single group, and their history and heritage are so intertwined with neighboring Christian communities that they are as settled as any church or Jewish community in the landscape. Their chief spiritual guide is Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, who eagerly extends the hand of friendship and cooperation with Christian leaders and whose associates are participating increasingly in local interreligious activities. Persons with Arab, South Asian, Iranian, African, Southeast Asian, and even European ancestry constitute the other major segments of the remaining Muslims. There are both Sunnis and Shi’ites in the United States. A few particular Islamic centers stand out as important locations for information and organization. Various affiliations have emerged to serve the Muslim population, some of which are ethnic in character and others are more broadly religiously identified, like the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America, and the American Muslim Council. Some centers and nearly all organizations produce journals and other publications. Whereas many Islamic community leaders in the past were drawn from business and other professional ranks, increasingly a number of Muslim scholars in a variety of fields including religion, language, history, and other social sciences stand out prominently in public discussions. Both Hartford Seminary and Georgetown University have internationally recognized centers for the study of Muslim-Christian relations. •