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Viewing the Other: From Hostility to Hospitality

World Religions Share their Wisdom

Study Unit 1: Introduction

The Elijah Interfaith Institute

Where Is Wisdom Found

VIEWING THE "OTHER": FROM HOSTILITY TO HOSPITALITY

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and the Approach to Addressing It

In the global village we are currently sharing, the question of otherness is pivotal, if not in fact urgent. When travel was less common and the world was a bigger place, religions could have, possibly, contented themselves with some form of isolation, folding in on themselves and restricting their exposure to difference somewhat successfully. If this was ever possible before, it is certainly no longer possible today. We all live in very close quarters, sharing very small spaces, bumping into each other easily and often. The relatively enclosed communities of the past – if they ever existed – are today experiencing, particularly in North America, an enforced multiculturalism that is

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for many overwhelming and deeply challenging. The question of otherness becomes primordial as a result.

Religious communities are presently asking themselves questions such as, who belongs and who does not? How does one qualify for membership into a religious tradition? How do serious adherents of one religion relate to serious adherents of another? How can they live side by side when their religions directly contradict each

other in some instances? In short, issues of religious exclusiveness are rising to the forefront as never before, and a religious tradition's understanding of both itself and others is key. The overall purpose of this set of study of units is, first, to explore these questions together, to consider various religious communities' attitudes toward their non-adherents (however these may be defined), and in particular to reflect on hospitality and hostility as elements of the repertory of responses to non-adherents. Second, to use the understanding gained as a basis for improved relations and productive dialogue among local communities. Religious communities can not afford to ignore each other – both because they often have to share parking space, and because clear lines between one community and the next rarely exist anymore.

It must be noted that different religions not only take different stances on issues of otherness, but also approach these issues with different intensity of concern. Religions are

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different – this is to be expected. And thus, each religion will have a different experience of these questions and will come to different conclusions. For example, in *Moses the Egyptian*, Jan Assman noted that polytheistic religions respond to religious otherness very differently than monotheistic ones. Polytheistic religions, he argued, tend to be much more flexible, as they, by their very nature of inherent multiplicity, incorporate human diversity more easily than does monotheism.

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Monotheistic religions do not have recourse to such elasticity, and thus will necessarily explore the question of otherness differently. This difference, and many others, will emerge from this process and the study group will have to negotiate them with great fluidity, allowing the differences of each religion, and their different responses to emerge naturally and in a comfortable environment of discussion.

It is certainly not the purpose of this study group to lump all religions into one convenient cauldron, or to identify one religious response to otherness as right and others as wrong. The goal is simply to explore these questions together, honestly, with integrity and courage, using both textual sources and concrete examples, and to bring back to our respective communities a new perspective, more questions, and hopefully greater respect and understanding for the "other" across the street, sharing our parking space, whoever it is that they may be.

To accomplish these many purposes, this set of study units is divided into six sessions. The present introductory session will serve to introduce the group to itself, and to the general theme of otherness, and will provide an overview of how each of the communities defines and regards its non-adherents. The presentations here are designed to provide a basis for initial discussions, but the need for brevity entails a risk of oversimplification. Much that is alluded to here will be treated in greater detail in the following five sessions, which will be devoted to the issue of otherness in five of the world's religions – one session for each religion. Points of comparison and contrast will be introduced as that process unfolds.

Judaism

Uniquely among world religions, Judaism is a religion associated with a particular people – the people of Israel. Membership in the religion is identical with membership in the people and *vice versa*. To be sure, the biblical narrative of Israel's history begins with the creation of the world, and several components of the Bible's creation story seem to stress the unity of mankind. Only humanity is created not as a species but as an individual who becomes the common ancestor of all humanity; all of mankind shares in the divine image, and partaking of the divine image demands respect for the life and dignity of all, providing the basis for prohibiting the shedding of blood. But however important those themes are in the creation story, man's creation in God's image does not thereafter figure as prominent in the Hebrew Bible. Humanity expands beyond its original, archetypal first being, and consequently organizes itself through social, national, and religious collectives. These establish competing identities for human beings and require striking a balance between universality and particularity.

This balancing act expresses itself clearly in many of the biblical laws regarding the "other." Israel developed into an ethnic community, and much of the biblical text is concerned with protecting it from both internal and external dangers. The *ger* – the outsider, foreigner, alien or sojourner – is treated with a combination of careful attention and separation. The *ger* is welcomed into the home for festivals and holidays, protected from abuse and guaranteed food and clothing. The Torah commands not only to treat the *ger* with equality, but it goes an important step

beyond that. It commands the *ger* be loved. The memory of Israel's enslavement provides the basis for this command. Israel's formative experience was exile — the enslavement in Egypt – and the Torah commands compassionate treatment of the "other" as a result.

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But the Torah's teachings with respect to the *ger* generally do not reflect the attitudes toward the "other" found in most Jewish communities today. The Torah spoke to a time when Jews lived independently on their land and could recall past exile, but Jewish history continued from there and plunged the Jews back into a harsh and enduring exile. The attitudes contemplated by the Torah gave way to a hardness born of continued suffering and a constant battle for survival: simply put, a landless victim was neither inclined nor able to show hospitality. And in better times, the risks of physical destruction were replaced by those of spiritual assimilation, only compounding the sense of xenophobia. For a variety of reasons, later Judaism established clear boundaries between one considered a Jew and one not considered a Jew, and the term *ger* is now applied to one who has converted to Judaism in accordance with the established procedures. As a practical matter, the Torah's discussion of the proper attitude to the *ger* has become superfluous, for the *ger* is no longer a stranger. But such technicalities are not the point. Judaism needs to rethink its attitude toward the stranger; it needs to re-locate the equilibrium encouraged by the Torah all the while taking into consideration the unique and complex realities

facing Israel and Judaism today. How can Judaism offer hospitality to the "other," rid itself of xenophobia and survive in a multicultural context, and more specifically, in a geographical context that has been dangerously hostile all at once?

Christianity

If Judaism is characterized by a tension between universal creation and a particular nation's special relationship with God, Christianity would seem to overcome that tension by redeeming the entire world and reconciling it to Christ. And that, in turn, makes it difficult to account for the hostility to the "other" that has been manifested in much of Christian history.

One suggested explanation is that the hostility is theological in nature, reflecting the distinction between old and new, untransformed and transformed behavior — i.e., between non-Christian and Christian communities — and allowing a distinction between different actions to become a distinction between different people. The "other" in this case, becomes the non-Christian, rendering the universalist impulse into something much more particular than initially conceived. The effect is compounded by the frequent resort to battle metaphors in portraying the importance of the struggle against evil; those metaphors can easily be turned against people who are not transformed and therefore seen as a threat to holiness. And that, in turn, can lead to persecution and oppression of the "other," who may be seen as defacing the image of God in which humanity was created.

Cutting against such hostility is the Christian concept of hospitality to the non-

Christian, including New Testament passages interpreted by some to imply that the consequences of Christ's resurrection are universal, not limited to believers. And Christ's human nature, shared with all humanity, allows for a unifying vision in which all humans are united in Christ. Not unlike the xenophobic strain in Judaism, which was nurtured not only by persecution but also by the interest in distinguishing oneself from the "other," the xenophobic strain in Christianity may have developed out of the struggle of nascent Christianity to define its identity.

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In addition to a theological basis for hospitality, Christianity contains as well an ethical basis for hospitality, following Jesus' compassionate treatment of society's outcasts. The implication is that Christian hospitality extends beyond the community of believers, encompassing all of humanity.

That said, a distinction remains between hospitality to individuals and hospitality to ideas. The latter, which entails "making space" for a foreign idea, may be more difficult to manifest. Nevertheless, Christianity may provide for that sort of hospitality as well, taking the "other" seriously and being prepared to learn from him or her.

Islam

As a multi-cultural faith community carrying the imprint of the classical Arab emphasis on hospitality, Islam has no difficulties with the cultural "other." At the same time, it is profoundly ill-at-ease with the theological "other" and with accepting the legitimacy of different religions. But Islam itself is a faith that has taken many historical forms, and the strains that have become dominant today in much of the Muslim world are particularly hostile, to the point of violence, toward other belief systems. In large part, they change Islam into a program of social reformation rather than a set of ideas about an individual's relationship to God.

Other strains of Islam have been more open, pursuing lines of scriptural interpretation, philosophical analysis, and spirituality that are largely overlooked today despite their historical prevalence. Recovery of those other forms opens the door to a very different view of the theological differences between Islam and other faiths. For example, an important 15th-century Sufi figure, 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili, interprets various Qur'anic verses in a manner suggesting that all religions are expressions of God's will: Islam is God's quintessential religion, but others are valid as well.

Classical Islam sees two distinct commands of God: the creative command, through which all human beings share natural duties and responsibilities growing out of a pre-Adamic covenant between God and humanity, and the command of

obligation, applying only to Muslims. The former calls to mind the ultimate commonality of humanity and helps avoid the hostility toward the "other" that might be spawned by the command of obligation considered alone. Only by keeping the two commands in balance can mercy — derived from the creative command — be kept in balance with justice, and can moral duties (rather than legal requirements) be assigned their proper priority.

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The Qur'an includes the concept of the human being as God's vice-regent on earth, implying the multi-dimensionality of humanity's existence, mirroring the multi-dimensionality of God's creation and will. In this way, space is made for the "other," for it is God's will that the "other," including his or her religious path, exist. Ultimately, theological hostility is grounded in the individual's ego taking a one-dimensional view and presumptuously ascribing it to God.

Hinduism

Hinduism is in a very particular situation, first and foremost because the term "Hinduism," and thus the religion identified as "Hinduism," is a relatively new one and only came into vogue in the last two centuries when British colonizers sought a generalizing and umbrella term to describe those traditions in India that were neither Christian nor Muslim. The term "Hindu" was

thus initially employed by outsiders, first as a geographic characterization, and then to refer to the religions of others. Eventually, "Hindus" themselves adopted the term to likewise differentiate themselves from the very people colonizing them.

This does not lead to the conclusion, however, that the issue of otherness was foreign to Hinduism until the 18th century. Hindus have been, and continue to be, highly aware of the boundaries that surround their communities. The internal awareness of class and caste, for example, has meant that alterity was always part of the Hindu mindset. Moreover, Hindus established taxonomies that also include those

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outside of the Hindu social system, thereby creating very clear categories of "insiders" and "outsiders." A common generalization and oversimplification of Hinduism suggests that, following the Advaita Vedanta metaphysic propounded in the 8th century, ultimately all humans, and in fact all things, are identical and/or equal to *Brahman* (an all-pervasive divine force). From such a perspective, perceived differences are explained away as cognitive errors. Notions of the "other" consequently seem to be foreign to Hinduism. Although this metaphysic marks a significant development in Hindu thought, and thus represents an ultimate truth to strive toward for many, as with all perspectives, it may also lead to a new form of otherness, affirming belief in one's own religious superiority and the inferiority of the religious different. Moreover, as with the example of class and caste above, it nevertheless exists in a conventional reality that demarcates otherness considerably.

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An alternative to the Advaita Vedanta model, that dismisses otherness as ultimately illusory, may be found in the long-standing Indian tradition of debate. Debates are formalized conversations that require participants to be more than familiar with the positions of their opponents. The various traditions of India have often sought to resolve or confront alterity and diversity through debate, which functions to humanize opponents and to welcome otherness. The Madhva school is a case in point. Madhvas are famous for polemics against their rivals. In fact debate and argument with other schools is an integral part of being and becoming a proper citizen of the Madhva world. Recognizing and embracing alterity is essential to Madhva, as to all, debate. The act of communication, involved in debate, forces those involved in the dialogue to recognize the human element all too often ignored. Such systems of debate can function as useful models for inter-faith dialogue.

Buddhism

Buddhist texts tend to speak more of universal friendship — that is, friendship toward all sentient beings, not only humans — than of hospitality. But while hospitality is secondary, it remains prominent as one of the natural manifestations of friendship.

According to the Buddha's teachings, hostility grows out of the wound caused by arrogance and self-importance, the need to see oneself as special. That leads to comparing oneself to others, and thus to feeling resentfully inferior, scornfully superior, or equal and therefore competitive. The Buddha urged his adherents to

cultivate internal qualities such as wisdom, compassion, tranquility, and emotional and intellectual flexibility, in order to avoid falling into the trap of wrong self-view. Those who do not work diligently to cultivate these virtues and choose, rather, to act self-indulgently in a way that causes harm, should be avoided, lest they compromise one's own efforts to cultivate virtue. It thus appears that, despite the affirmation of universal friendship, such people — who have chosen not to pursue the path advocated by Buddhism — may be said to constitute an "other." But these "others" who lack virtue do not pose a significant threat in Buddhism. Rather, they are considered *bala puthajjana*, or ignorant and childlike beings. They are very much like oneself, but less evolved. In that respect, Buddhism shares with other Indian religions the tendency to regard itself as the model of maturity and other religious systems as representing earlier stages of development. The attitude may be paternalistic, but has the advantage of not regarding the practitioner of the other religion as in any way a threat or even an annoyance.

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Such responses to the "other" must be understood in the context of Buddhist philosophy. From the Buddhist perspective, everything is temporary, transient and lacking in a permanent or fixed essence, including ourselves. To attach oneself too firmly to oneself, one's views, or others necessarily leads to folly, and then to harm. In this context, the concept of the "other"

has little significance. The "other" has no inherent existence; to attach oneself to one's view of them is necessarily short-sighted as a result. It is primarily for this reason that so little of Buddhist literature addresses the issue of otherness with any element of hostility. Hostility is the result of attachment to views, as is the very concept of otherness, and thus has no place in the Buddhist worldview.

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And yet, history presents us with numerous examples of lived Buddhist hostility, such as in Sri Lanka today, or in Japan during the second World War. Women are excluded from monastic life in Theravada countries, as well as in Tibet. Hostility and exclusion emerges in multiple forms, demonstrating that Buddhist people are like all other people, despite the virtual absence of hostile sources that might have inspired hostile behavior.

Questions for Discussion

1. Catalogue and compare the various ways in which a dominant community might relate to outsiders or strangers. Do "hospitality," "xenophobia," and "hostility" exhaust the field? How might they be combined within the same community's attitudes? If you were the outsider, how would you react to each type of treatment?

2. What theological presuppositions lead to the various possible attitudes?

3. How do you perceive your own tradition's attitude toward adherents of other traditions?

4. Consider the viewpoints of the various traditions on whether differences among people are real or illusory.

5. Consider the relationships within each tradition between theory and practice regarding attitudes toward the "other."

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