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Response

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Response

NEIL GILLMAN

I am deeply honored by this extraordinary collection of papers. Rather than responding to them individually, I have prepared this overview of my current thinking on the issues on my theological agenda which will also serve as an implicit commentary on the papers themselves. My gratitude to Rabbi Martin Cohen and Rabbi Lawrence Troster, to the Editorial Board of *Conservative Judaism*, to Ms. Amy Gottlieb and Ms. Evin Simon, and to the contributors is unbounded. I am particularly gratified that the writers include academicians, congregational rabbis both from our movement and elsewhere, rabbinical students (at the time of writing), and a student in adult education courses that I have taught. I understand this range of contributors as one measure of my accomplishment.

Revelation is the Primary Theological Issue

From as far back as I have been doing theology, my two major issues have been revelation and epistemology. Revelation, because it poses the issue of authority in matters of belief and practice, and how we deal with the authority of Torah determines what we can proceed to teach as believing Jews. It is the paradigmatic meta-theological issue. Epistemology, because it is the paradigmatic meta-philosophical issue. Epistemology deals with how we know anything, from apples, to egos, to quarks and also to God.

— Response —

The foundational status of epistemology first became clear to me in an undergraduate seminar on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at McGill. We (four students and the professor) were reading the text almost sentence by sentence when someone asked "Does Kant have a metaphysics?" In a flash, a colleague responded, "No! It's all epistemology." "Of course," commented our instructor. "Without epistemology, how can you do metaphysics?" There is no way around Kant. Without an epistemology, there is also no theology.

If there was a parallel epiphany in my understanding of revelation, it came about in my first year of studies in rabbinical school. That was when it gradually seeped into my awareness that almost no one in the room, not my fellow students nor my instructors, believed that the account of the revelation of Torah at Sinai, as narrated in Exodus 19–20, was historically accurate or literally true.

No one had ever taught me that that account was in fact accurate and true. I sometimes fantasize how it would have been to have had a traditionalist Jewish education against which I might rebel. But my serious Jewish education began toward the end of my McGill years, not in McGill classrooms—there was not a single course in Jewish studies at McGill in the early fifties—but largely on my own, with the help of a *melamed*, and the generous support of three members of the Rabbinical Assembly, my Hillel rabbi, the late Samuel Cass, and two other Montreal rabbis, both gratefully still with us, Wilfred Shuchat and Maurice Cohen. My debt to them, after all of these years, remains unlimited. As I began to engage in the serious study of Judaism, I simply assumed what I thought all Jews believed. This was a case of primary naiveté with a vengeance!

I have since guided generations of students through the process of breaking this myth and I appreciate how painful it can be. For my part, I was able to live with the contradictions as long as I was a student and felt no external pressure to resolve them. But subliminally, at least, the tension lingered, and in retrospect, the stimulus for my pervasive and persistent critique of the culture of the Seminary's rabbinical school was precisely my experience of this tension between a secularized academic program on one hand, which was designed to create ritually observant Jews and religious

role models on the other. I always felt that this dissonance was incongruous. Nor were we ever exposed to a systematic theological inquiry which might have resolved the tension.

What saved me was first, the invitation to teach Seminary students, and second, Mordecai Kaplan. My first teaching experiences were safe: I taught Jewish intellectual history. But eventually, I began to teach theology to rabbinical students, and I resolved not to teach as I had been taught. I was convinced that no rabbinical student should be ordained without being helped to construct a coherent and sophisticated personal theology. But how could I demand from them what I myself could not provide? Some extraordinarily gifted students challenged me to go beyond teaching what other great Jewish minds believed, and speak for myself. But did I have a coherent personal theology?

Mordecai Kaplan and Paul Tillich

I had been assigned to Mordecai Kaplan's classes in Midrash and Philosophies of Judaism in my second year in the school and I fervently resisted his impact. I had entered the school as a Herbergian existentialist. Kaplan's religious naturalism was anathema to me. To this day, I recall my feelings of horror when, one day in class, he said: "Judaism is whatever Jews say it is." But when I began to work on creating an integrated theological position, one which would cohere with the rest of my Seminary education, with the way I (and my students) had been taught Bible and rabbinics, with the rulings of the Law Committee, and with the culture of the Conservative Movement, I realized that Kaplan had done the work for me. Kaplan had integrated theology, ideology, and program.

As I was returning to Kaplan, I was also reading Paul Tillich for my doctoral exams at Columbia. Tillich's discussion of myth and symbol in his *Dynamics of Faith* coincided neatly with my gradual appropriation of Kaplan's theological naturalism. Tillich provided me with a vocabulary for appreciating the residual power of traditional theological claims without the literalist baggage that I was in the process of discarding. James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* introduced me to Paul Ricoeur's notion of second naivete which helped me understand why the traditional liturgy and ritual continued to move me despite my

new theological orientation. Kaplan, Tillich, and Ricoeur, together with Herberg (whom I met at McGill and whose *Judaism and Modern Man* changed my life) formed the original core of my personal canon.

Epistemology is the Primary Philosophical Issue

If my original epiphany dealt with the issue of revelation, the next dealt with God. Tillich had taught me that the Sinai narrative was classic myth, and that all characterizations of God are perforce symbols, or metaphors as I preferred to refer to them, or much later, my current favored term, “word pictures.” It took some years before the full implications of naturalism were able to sink in. But at a certain point, I realized that if Judaism is the creation of the Jewish people, and if not only the canonization but even the substance of the religion of the Bible (and of course, that of the rabbis) was the creation of a community of Jews—however I was to deal with God’s revelatory role—then the images of God that appeared everywhere in our sacred literature were also created by my ancestors. I began to ask of every biblical narrative, why did they tell the story this way? And where did they get the metaphors?

This is precisely where the epistemological issues became paramount. I recall a brief exchange with Professor Albert Hofstadter at Columbia when I was searching for a dissertation topic. I had indicated that I wished to deal with issues in religious epistemology. Is what we have of God knowledge? How do we know? How do we deal with illusion? How do we deal with truth and falsity in theology? Hofstadter proceeded to outline the stages of the inquiry which I would have to pursue. His conclusion: either a theological statement is legitimately knowledge, or it is poetry, a subjective expression of feeling. “Now there’s nothing wrong with poetry,” he concluded, “but I suspect that you would be unhappy with that conclusion.” I wrote my dissertation on the religious epistemology of the French Catholic existentialist, Gabriel Marcel, demonstrating that Marcel, for one, made a legitimate case for an epistemology that could deal specifically with theological claims. That conclusion was supported by my reference to the British philosopher, John Wisdom’s seminal essay, “Gods” which I first read in a seminar at McGill.

That inquiry has served me well. The core of Marcel's argument is that we can move beyond the critical stage of the knowledge building operation—the stage involved in all rationalisms, most forms of science, natural theology—in order to recapture a more primitive form of awareness that is legitimate in and of itself. I later identified this “second reflection” (Marcel's term) with Ricoeur's second (or willed) naiveté, James Fowler's movement from his Stage 4 to Stage 5 in his *Stages of Faith*, and Tillich's reaffirming the power of the myth as “broken” but still very much “alive.” Even later, I detected a similar argument implicit in Heschel's thought. Heschel is far less systematic than these other thinkers and uses none of their more technical vocabulary, which may account for my decades-long struggle with Heschel in my writing and teaching. More on this below.

My interest in epistemology led me to begin to read and think about neuroscience. In its crudest form, my question was, how can a chemical reaction in my brain create an idea of God. This was Descartes' issue, of course, which he never really answered, but neither did the later philosophical tradition. I understood that sense perception was a highly complex process which involves different parts of my brain working together. All human perception is interactive and interpretive. The perceiving subject (me) is aggressively involved in whatever happens when I “see” an apple, and if that is the case with an apple, how much more so when I experience God. I concluded that in contrast with the Hasidic comment that God is “wherever we let God in,” I believe that God is wherever we put God in.

More recently, I have begun to reflect on how notions of God emerge in theories of human psychological and cognitive development. Some years ago, the late Dr. Mortimer Ostow invited me to participate with him in a workshop that brought together liturgists from our faculty and psychoanalysts to study how prayer and our liturgy affect the psychic experience of the worshiper. Those discussions led to Ostow's *Spirit, Mind, and Body* (Columbia University Press, 2007). Our group has continued to meet and our discussions now focus on faith development. I have been introduced to the writings of the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, and the American psychoanalysts, Ana-Maria Rizzutto, together with those of Freud and Ostow himself. Much of this material is new and challenging to me, but I am intrigued with the notion that for the child, God serves as a “transitional object” that inhabits an intermediate area of experience, that is, in other

words, both “inside” and “outside” at the same time, is retained throughout life and belongs to “. . . the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.” (For more on this, see Ostow, p. 63ff.)

To put this another way, God as transitional object is accessed by Marcel’s second reflection, Ricoeur’s second naiveté, and Fowler’s and Tillich’s recapturing of the myth as both broken and yet living. In a peculiar way, then, many different strands of my thinking have begun to converge.

God

I understand all references to God both in our texts and in our thinking and discourse as humanly-crafted images. When I asked for the source of these images in our sacred literature, it became clear that it came from within our ancestors’ own self-awareness. Our teacher Yochanan Muffs has written about the “personhood” of God in Torah. The notion, however heretical, that our ancestors fashioned God in the image of the human made it possible to understand how God is portrayed throughout Torah as well as in the Talmudic aggadah.

However much this evolving theology liberated my own thinking, it clearly troubled many of my students. My use of the term “myth” in the academic sense of the term could never escape the popular notion that it was synonymous with a fiction. The notion that God was captured in humanly-crafted metaphors was met with the almost inevitable question “Do we invent God or discover God” to which my equally inevitable response was “We discover God and invent the images.” The notion of second naiveté was perplexing, though I tried to deal with this by claiming that though we are taught that the biblical account of the exodus from Egypt is not history, when we sit around the seder table on Passover, we can recite the *haggadah* without worrying about its historical accuracy. That was second naiveté in action.

My interest in the epistemological issues involved in the farther reaches of science was sparked by a conviction that science and theology have never been closer. Both construct a reality that we don’t see in order to explain what we do see. My friend Bob Pollack, the Columbia molecular biologist, opened his undergraduate course in biology by positing that the primary qualification for being a good scientist is imagination. Mortimer Ostow,

like Pollack a serious worshipping Jew, agreed that Freudian psychoanalysis was a classic myth. And in a brief exchange with an astronomer, I asked not quite innocently, “Was the big bang loud?” His answer, “Of course not. There was no air so there was no sound. The big bang is pure poetry.”

So both epistemologically and even ontologically, there is little intrinsic difference between God and up and down quarks, dark matter, strings vibrating in eleven dimensions, the Higgs boson, and the Freudian ego. What do I gain from this? The claim that what theologians do is not idiosyncratic. The long-standing assumption that science and religion are at war with each other is no longer the case. My dissertation dealt with the twin issues of falsification and verification which are at the heart of the epistemological issue and attempted to show that allowing for the inherent differences between the two disciplines, Marcel does provide a method for satisfying these two demands.

Heschel

Parenthetically, I should add that my initial plan had been to deal with these very issues in the writings of Heschel. My Columbia mentors, however, determined that Heschel was not sufficiently rigorous to justify a doctoral inquiry. Marcel’s writings, though also somewhat elusive, were clearly much more systematic and had rarely been studied by English-speaking academicians. In addition, on issues of substance, his approach was eerily similar to Heschel’s. Heschel himself, in a private conversation, acknowledged that he had come across Marcel’s writings relatively late in his own career, and had only a passing familiarity with its substance.

I should concede that as much as I struggled with Kaplan’s thinking in my early years, I have also, for decades and for entirely different reasons, struggled with Heschel. Heschel’s writings frustrated me. On a superficial level, I bemoaned his elusiveness. But more seriously, I questioned his reluctance to engage in a sustained theological or philosophical inquiry, his tendency to raise a serious methodological issue only to divert the reader with a Hasidic tale or a midrash, his reluctance to inform us of his sources or to consider the range of possible alternative optional positions on the issue under discussion. My issues were more methodological than substantive. I

reluctantly acknowledged that he had the right to do philosophy as he understood it, but then, he had the further responsibility to justify his choice of a methodology.

What I really wanted from him was to be more hard-headed, more critical. But more recently, I began to sense that what he was pursuing, using another idiom, was precisely what Marcel dubbed a second reflection, a post-critical return to that more primitive awareness that he felt, alone could serve as an epistemological basis for theology. That's what he meant when he insisted that God was an "ontological presupposition." True, he could have been more systematic about asserting this claim—Marcel surely was—but it was probably my responsibility to decipher what he was trying to say. This is one of a number of issues on which I confess that I have come to change my mind.

God is Where We Put God In

When our rabbinic ancestors determined that we should praise God for the miracles that occurred in post-biblical, Maccabean times, they put God into history. Our colleagues did the same when they created an *Al HaNissim* liturgy to recite on Israeli Independence Day. In neither case was God's presence objectively verifiable. Both are examples of historiography, human attempts to read history, subjective, interpretive moments when we are invited to "see" God's presence in the world. But so was the narrative voice in Exodus 14:30–31 who made the leap from perceiving dead Egyptians on the banks of the sea to claiming that Israel "saw" God's mighty hand stretched out against Egypt. Using my own preferred idiom, these are instances of using our classic religious myth to impose meaning on historical events.

To use an alternative metaphor, perceiving God's presence in history or in our lives is a matter of connecting the dots. I used that metaphor long before its post 9/11 use by the CIA, but here, there are many more dots—effectively the broadest possible canvas of nature, history and the human experience—and the dots are unnumbered, or rather there are multiple numbers next to each dot so that they can be connected in different ways. The believer and the non-believer choose to connect different sets of dots

which reveal different patterns. Again the webbing that binds the dots to disclose meaning is what I call the Torah myth.

What I have called the kaleidoscope of God-pictures which are omnipresent in our texts- bring these patterns into the daily life of the worshipping community. It is through these portraits—not in oils or in stone or wood, but in words—that God assumes personhood with a body (see *Shir HaKavod*), motivations, and feelings—of rage, disappointment, hope, yearning, and the rest, the ensemble that Heschel referred to as the divine pathos. Most of those classical images are stimulated by the feelings of the author(s) of these texts. We identify with those images through our own feelings. Theology recapitulates anthropology. The next step would be for us to identify our own feelings about God and then to translate them into word pictures of our own. Still other images of God, in Maimonides and Kaplan for example, are inspired less by the heart than by the mind; they serve as a capstone for a philosophical system. But what of the God that lies beyond the kaleidoscope of God-pictures? Here, I can only resort to the *En Sof* of the Kabbalists, or to Heschel's notion of the ineffable. Here, Heschel might have said, we can only sing or dance.

Are We a Halakhic Movement?

Apart from my use of the term “myth,” no other teaching of mine has elicited more criticism than my claim that it is disingenuous for the Conservative movement to refer to itself as a halakhic movement. The most thoroughgoing statement of that claim was in my address to a convention of the USCJ in Boston in 2006, later published as “Toward an Aggadah for Conservative Judaism” in *CJ* and then again in my recently published collection, *Doing Jewish Theology*. In retrospect, I had been inching toward that position in a number of earlier addresses and papers. It came first as my response to a student who protested that some decision of the CJLS was illegitimate because it was not “within the halakha.” I launched into a disquisition into the issue of the fluidity of halakhic boundaries and the theological assumptions that shaped halakhah. I concluded then that I could see no value in our use of the terms “*the* halakhah” or “*the* halakhic process” with the definite article as if there was one clearly defined and circumscribed reality in each case. The Boston address was my most systematic

attempt to defend that position and I see no reason to abandon it. Again, what I was criticizing was not what we do but how we define ourselves.

Further Issues

I was gratified to note that a number of issues to which I have devoted much thought in class and in my writings are represented in this collection. One is ritual. My concern was sparked by our failure as a movement to create a ritually observant community. I attributed this failure, at least in part, to the fact that ritual studies, a sub-category of the academic study of religion, was not represented on our rabbinical curricula. Nor, in fact, was a course on religion itself. I understood it as a problem that was particularly relevant in our movement because we advocate a ritually observant lifestyle without the underpinnings of a literalist understanding of revelation.

A second such issue is eschatology, specifically the eschatology of the individual. My own writings on the afterlife form a significant part of my bibliography and I have often claimed that the last chapter of *The Death of Death* is the single piece of my writing of which I remain most proud.

A third is the culture of the Seminary's Rabbinical School. In my decades here, as a student, faculty and Dean of the school, I have worked on a number of curricular revisions, becoming ever more aware that the issue is not curriculum but the culture of the Seminary itself, and the Rabbinical School's model of the rabbi which it hopes to create. I have nothing to add here to everything that I have written on the ideology of our movement and on rabbinic education here, except to say that my own personal ideal was the late Gerson Cohen's advocacy of what he called "Jewish humanism."

Finally, I must acknowledge the contributions to all of my work on the part of generations of Seminary students in class and in endless private conversations. I acknowledge also the extent to which my thinking has been sharpened by conversations with my faculty colleagues, particularly with Professors Steven Brown, former Dean of the Davidson School of Education, and Stephen Geller of the Bible Department with whom I team-taught courses in Education and Bible respectively. To this list, I add my long-standing friend and colleague, Professor Joel Roth with whom I debated the future of the Conservative Movement in different settings here and elsewhere. Those debates remain memorable.

Theology is Indispensable

If there has been one overriding goal to all of my teaching, it is to convey my conviction that theology is indispensable to any form of Jewish religious identity. I came back into Judaism in my college years on the wings of philosophy and theology and my original goal was to teach Jewish philosophy. Harvard's Harry Austryn Wolfson convinced me that in order to teach Jewish philosophy, I needed a basic Jewish education which I had never had, and which I could receive at JTS. In one of my earliest classes at the Seminary, my instructor told me that in fact Jewish theology was not important as long as I observed the *mitzvot*—a judgment that was to be repeated many times over by other members of the faculty. I was convinced then that they were wrong; I responded that I couldn't begin to observe anything without a theology. I remain so convinced.

That this collection of papers supports my personal conviction is the least of the reasons why I am filled with gratitude. Thank you all.