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LEARNING TO LIVE WITHOUT 'IDENTITY'

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In our tradition we have for many centuries tended to alternate between two styles of thinking that I shall call globalism and localism. The globalist outlook wants to see a single set of universal laws of reason, laws of nature, and moral principles prevailing throughout the whole world. But in reaction against it, localist thinking emphasises local differences, and tells us to identify with our own cultural tradition - our own distinctive vision of the world, our faith and customs. Above all, we should seek out and cling to everything that differentiates us from the rest of humanity, and binds us together. Difference is more important and valuable than sameness.

The contrast I am describing is familiar in the Hebrew Bible. The globalist or universalist strain, found in some of the Latter Prophets and the Writings, presents a religious vision that reaches out to the whole of humanity, whereas the localist strain concentrates exclusively upon the election by God of the people of Israel, their special task and destiny. At its most globalist, the Hebrew Bible speaks of Adam, and is a book for all humanity. At its most localist the Hebrew Bible is extremely ethnocentric, laying down all the ritual observances by which the Jews insist upon their difference from all other peoples, and saying to them that your own people's special relation to your God is the fundamental fact about you which must rule your whole life. For you, Jewishness comes first in every way, and humanity in general comes a rather poor second.

In the more recent Western tradition, the great triumph of Isaac Newton's physics made globalism prevail across the Western world for over a century. Newton had proved that a universal mathematical physics was possible. He had shown that all local motion everywhere in the Universe is governed by a small set of simple and clear mathematical rules. Nature was an elegant and predictable machine, the same everywhere, and it seemed that the whole scheme of things within which we human beings live was well-designed and good. There were universal laws of Reason and of Nature, and it seemed obvious that our human codes of law and morals should follow the same pattern and be the same everywhere. People began to speak about international law, and to draw up declarations of universal 'Rights of Man'.

Globalism peaked, one might say, in the language of the American and French Revolutions, and in the work of the Jewish scholar Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1788), in whose day some leading Jews even contemplated giving up their separate Jewish identity and becoming completely assimilated into liberal Protestant Christianity. That is something we could hardly imagine today, for of course during the nineteenth century there was a sharp localist reaction in the rise of messianic nationalism, not only amongst the Jews themselves, but in many countries. Your nation had its own distinctive language, history, culture and art-tradition, and you must be prepared to sacrifice your life for the sake of its honour, its independence and its sovereignty. In fact, nationalism and the cult of the national spirit became an immensely powerful secular religion. Ethnocentrism was a sacred duty.

Extreme nationalism divides the whole world up into competing nations, each of which thinks only of its own interest. In time, it provokes a reaction, as internationally-minded

people try to check national egoism and develop international laws, conventions and institutions. And that is roughly where we are today.

This political history has been reflected in the history of religions. The scholars of the Enlightenment were the first to construct a list of major world religions, each with its own great territory, its language, its culture, its history, its doctrines and rituals. Thus, as the modern nation-state was being invented, so the modern conception of a religion as a kind of spiritual nation was also being invented. People found themselves committed by birth to sacred territories: to Christendom, or Islam, or Hindoostan, or the Buddhist world, or to what was usually called 'fetishism' or 'animism'. Language, culture, religion, homeland - these things were all part of your birthright.

This was a fateful development, because in due course it made people around the world aware of their own distinctive religion as their own heritage. One had a duty to know about it, and take a pride in it, so that as in politics the concept of 'my nation' was the seedbed of militant nationalism, so people began to get militant and assertive about their own distinctive religious heritage. It's not something you question or criticize: it is something you fight for. So Judaism begat 'Sionism', Islam begat 'Islamism', Hindooism begat militant BJP-Hindu nationalism, and even Buddhist monks took to the streets. It was the West that had invented the concept of a religion as a great cultural bloc that was your heritage, and through which you identified yourself, and it was the West that invented the transformation of objectified religion into aggressively militant ethnonationalist ideology. So the early-twentieth-century world of warring nation-states gave way in due course to the late-twentieth-century world of warring religions, often fighting for sovereignty over territory.

It's worse than that. As during the twentieth century there was an enormous expansion of world population from one to six billions, technological advances, political upheavals and cheap mass travel all combined to encourage very large-scale population movements. These movements are transforming every large country - and especially every large Western country - from a nation into an empire. A nation is a more-or-less ethnically and religiously homogeneous group of people, who feel they are all of one blood, and are indeed all interconnected by descent. By contrast, an empire embraces under a single political authority many peoples of very diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Thus the British used to be, and to feel they were, a nation; but now they feel the country becoming more like an empire. More than that, we realise that our modern conception of what a religion is commits the people of each major faith to try to build around themselves the entire social and cultural world of their own tradition. And it is indeed entirely natural that, just as Christians have long wanted to Christianize the whole of British social and cultural life, so today Muslims should want to make Britain into an Islamic country. Even the Jews, tiny though their numbers now are, can still seek planning permission to create purely-Jewish districts by running overhead wires around them to create an 'eruv'.

A practical contradiction thus arises. Britain has become like an empire, and I for one rather like living in an empire, with all its cultural richness and variety. It's as if, nowadays, 'everything is everywhere': almost all the peoples, all the cultures and religions of the world are represented today in modern London, a city of 200 languages, just as all the varied voices and activities of humankind can quickly be accessed in one's own study. But it is not going to be possible for any one religious group to dominate completely, and to remake the whole human world in its own image. All of us now have to learn to live as members of one minority group amongst others. All of us now have to acknowledge others, and must also acknowledge the (limited) sovereignty of the state to which we owe allegiance.

When in the past many competing religious and ethnic groups had to coexist within one empire, the standard method of reducing friction was segregation. The capital city was divided into 'Quarters', and different ethnic groups lived in different villages - an arrangement that survives in many places today. But in dynamic, rapidly-developing societies segregation soon leads to inequality, and inequality leads to sharp political unrest; and my own belief is that our modern experience is showing us that we need to change our understanding of religion. We need to give up the idea that in our own tradition we already have, readymade, a complete civilization in miniature, founded on an exclusive and final revelation of Truth, and demanding our absolute and exclusive allegiance. Still more do we need to give up the idea that our very identity as persons is given us by and through our commitment to such an idea of religion. And that is what I mean by 'learning to live without identity'. We need to become inwardly globalized. Nowadays, when 'everything is everywhere', I'd rather lose my identity and be everyone and anyone.

Ten years ago I was asked to write a contribution to a symposium of essays on the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. In response to that challenge, I wrote a deliberately subversive piece saying that I was unhappy with the whole idea of there being two big things, one called Judaism and the other called Christianity, and each being a kind of finished block that is not going to change. Sorry, but no: that whole way of dividing up the religious world and talking about religious differences is now inappropriate. In our society we don't live in one or another of a whole series of walled-off ghettos. Everything is everywhere, and everything now mingles. None of us can claim privileged access to his own tradition: on the contrary, all your tradition is just as accessible to me as mine is to you. The whole idea of any privileged access to Truth is dead.

Everything is in the melting-pot, everything mingles, and I'd like to talk about what will emerge from this mingling. Where is it taking us, and what kind of future will there be for religion?

Here is what I wrote just ten years ago, and what I still think today.

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Is it now too late to be talking about Jewish-Christian dialogue? As it is usually understood, the phrase implies cautious, friendly conversations or negotiations between teams of somewhat elderly parties, mostly male, who represent two independent communities of faith. The aim is to find some common ground and to establish amicable relations - in short, to agree to differ, because it is tacitly taken for granted that the two communities propose to remain permanently distinct. We are coming together in order to agree upon how we can most peaceably stay apart. On neither side is there expected to be any compromise whatever, because it is taken for granted that religious allegiance is like allegiance to one's own nation, but even more so. It is, both what people call an 'identity', and what people call an 'absolute'. That seems to mean that through it, uniquely, we identify ourselves, finding our place in the world and our task in life; and that therefore its moral claim upon us overrides all other claims. Accordingly, negotiations between representatives of different religious groups are rather like diplomatic negotiations between the representatives of distinct sovereign nation-states. The talks may lead to the establishment of peaceful, friendly and co-operative relations between two sovereign parties. But sovereignty itself remains axiomatically not-negotiable. It is an absolute, a unique 'identity', almost an eternal essence, something that one cannot envisage ever being superseded or becoming obsolete. Its claims are a matter of life and death. For their

sake one must be ready to accept martyrdom, or even (nowadays) to get involved with terrorism.

This ancient idea of unconditional allegiance to some local group is still found in many forms in the late-modern world. It may be called fundamentalism, tribalism, communalism, ethnonationalism, and so on; and it creates a rather untidy picture of the human scene. The local god, or nation, or other object of unconditional allegiance to which people rally may be almost any threatened language, or ethnic group, or 'race', or religious group, or nation state; and the domains of these varied rival foci of 'absolute' allegiance may very easily overlap, and so create acute and painful conflicts in the minds of individuals.

Now I have a number of arguments to put forward in connection with this situation. Their cumulative effect is, I shall suggest, that we should give up the received quasi-political and highly reifying ways of thinking about 'the Synagogue' and 'the Church', and the dialogue between them. The very notion of 'a religion' as a small, distinct, unchanging, self-identical, closed ideological world, like an isolated sovereign nation, in which people are unanimous in matters of belief, is dead. Notoriously, we can't even say very clearly exactly who 'the Jews' are nowadays, or who might count as their officially-accredited and generally-recognized representatives. There are too many shades of lapsed membership and partial belief. And much the same is true of 'Christianity' and 'the Church'. I shall argue that the real situation is that if we want to go on thinking of 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' as distinct traditions, each with its own literature, its own body of beliefs, its characteristic style, then we should recognize that they are nowadays fast becoming entities like 'Platonism'; as their embodiment in a distinct community of shared belief becomes ever less clear-cut, they are becoming assimilated. They are turning into relatively enduring and identifiable strands within an historically-evolving global cultural tradition. As such, they are no longer strictly tied to just one territory or organisation: they are becoming public property, freely accessible to everyone, and part of everyone's thinking. In this sense, I am myself as Jewish as many Jews, and as much a Buddhist as many Buddhists. Nowadays, surely, we all of us 'contain multitudes'.

A great tradition eventually comes to belong to all humankind. When, not long ago, the site of Aristotle's Lyceum was found in Athens, local politicians declared grandiloquently that the remains 'bear witness to the continuity of Hellenic civilization', with the implication that they see themselves as the true and legitimate heirs and successors of Pericles and Plato. But in practice people around the world seem to feel able to study Plato and Aristotle for themselves, without needing to seek instruction from modern Greek politicians and philosophers. And similarly, it has become very noticeable in recent years that the best writing about Christianity no longer comes from Christians, nor even from traditional academic theologians. It comes from post-Christians, and has done so for many years, because modern Christians have come down in the world since the days of their own great tradition, just as modern Greeks and Egyptians are not quite the equals of their ancient predecessors. In which case we should perhaps think of giving up the idea that 'Christians', 'Muslims' and 'Jews' are three very distinct communities rather like nation-states, each with privileged access to its own unchanging core-tradition of religious and moral wisdom. Until about the sixteenth century something like that was indeed the case: if you wanted to learn about another major tradition, then you had to travel and to sit at the feet of a learned person from within that tradition. But nowadays abundant printed books, the free worldwide dissemination of information, and the globalization of culture have made everything freely available to everyone. We can now be anything and everything. Most of us, at least, are not confined, and do not wish to be confined, to a cultural or religious sub-world or ghetto. Judaism and Christianity, like Platonism and Buddhism, are

becoming strands in everyone's thinking. The old idea of an exclusive and unchanging historically-transmitted religious 'identity' - a unique body of truth in the sole custody of a special body of people - is rapidly becoming obsolete.

Is it not curious that the people who are chosen to represent us in ecumenical and interfaith conversations always turn out to be very cautious and conservative characters who think like

lawyers? In a world in which tradition is dying, we seem to feel safest when we are represented by extreme traditionalists. We like to be represented by people who are utterly unrepresentative of us. It is as if we very much want them to go on defending, on our behalf, positions that we no longer hold ourselves.

What then has happened? In the earliest times - or so we are told - religion was mono cultural and henotheistic. Each people or ethne had their own language, their own sacred territory and their own god. Identities were clear-cut to such an extent that if you went to live in another territory, amongst -other people, those new people became your people and their god your god. (See Ruth 1:15f.; 1 Samuel 26:19 etc.). The notion that religion is - or at least ideally should be - strictly ethnic and territorial has survived to this day. People still use terms like Christendom and Islam in a territorial way, and speak of lands like France and Italy as 'Roman Catholic countries'. Politicians in those countries do not find it at all easy to acknowledge publicly the fact that there may very soon be - and perhaps already are - more practising Muslims than practising Catholics in the home population. In Italy some years ago, politicians who were not themselves practising Catholics at all nevertheless found they simply could not bring themselves to attend the inauguration of Rome's first major mosque. They were accustomed to thinking of themselves as non-Catholics in a Catholic country, and somehow could not take in the thought that they might be turning into non-Muslims in a Muslim country.

Our thinking about true religion and territoriality has become oddly confused. For more than one-and-a-half millennia the Jews were in effect the principal and most obvious example of an ancient faith that had lost its own territory and now survived within Christendom, within Islam, and elsewhere in encapsulated form. People identified themselves as Jews, and were identified, in every other way except through their possession of their own holy land. Your Jewishness was conveyed to you through your genealogy, your community-membership, your language, scriptures, customs and cultural tradition: but territory - no. The Jews were often regarded as a dispersed, homeless, fugitive people, living in a state of what seemed permanent diaspora, homelessness. The state of being exiled from one's proper sacred territory seemed pitiable. Then came the Restoration, the founding of the state of Israel, and a seemingly wonderful fulfilment of prophecy. But, fifty years later, not all Jews have wished to return, and visitors to Israel are astonished to find what a secular society it is, and how little regard is paid to the Torah. Can Judaism not survive the fulfilment of its own hopes? Is the recovered possession of one's own holy land somehow now a religiously bad thing? In countries like the United States there has for some time been anxiety that the Jews in diaspora may disappear within half a century by marrying-out, and by complete assimilation into the host culture. But now we find that a worse danger threatens in the opposite direction: the Return to Israel fulfils Judaism - and then eclipses it, as all the previous old religious values of Judaism disappear into militant nationalist politics.

Judaism, then, seems to be caught between Scylla and Charybdis. In America, and in 'the West' generally, it threatens to become just one more strand in the new globalized worldhistorical culture, like Platonism. It will become simply part of the universal syllabus, part of everybody's heritage, and will no longer be, nor need to be, embodied in a distinct visible human society. At the opposite extreme, Judaism also disappears in Israel. The ancient dream of a mono-ethnic theocratic state society cannot be realized in the modern world, except by turning religious values into political ones.

Islam is, of course, nowadays caught in just the same dilemma: and so is Christianity. The ideal of 'a Christian country' is fading, disappearing. In Western society at large, 'the Christian tradition' has become just one more strand in everybody's cultural heritage. What survives of 'the Church' is so drastically reduced that it no longer has any special claim to, nor expertise in, the old 'great' tradition. In which case, conversations between officially-nominated teams of Jewish and Christian representatives will be mainly exercises in denial. They will be conducted as if old-style distinct, homogeneous faith communities, in which traditional religious values are preserved intact, still exist - which is not the case, in a world where all of us alike are 'mediatized', immersed in the new media culture. And so long as we go on clinging to the memory of our lost closed worlds, for so long we will be failing to discuss the prospect that faces us all alike - both people who are ancestrally Jewish, and people who are ancestrally Christian - in the new globalized world-culture. At our interfaith conversations we try to reassure ourselves that we really are still different from each other and do still possess our own distinct 'identities'. But the reality is that the process of world-cultural assimilation is swallowing us both up. We are becoming more and more alike. All distinct ethnic and religious identities, of the old kind that we are so desperately nostalgic for, are rapidly vanishing.

This very painful example brings out the scale of today's religious crisis. We are right to have seen the Jews as 'a light to the nations', because certain universal structures of religious thought have been so clearly and even classically exemplified for us all by the Jews for so long. The central idea is that of a domain unified under a Monarch, a transcendent controlling principle and focus of loyalty that has instituted and now orders everything. The Monarch's power unifies everything and makes it all holy: the Holy Land, the Holy People, the sacred language, the Holy Books of the Law. There is a very clear line between the sacred and profane realms, and it is the line that separates insiders from outsiders; and all your various loyalties - to your people to your mother-tongue, to your land, to your holy city, to your God and so on - are fully synthesized.

Some such arrangement as this prevailed for most of the time around the world from the beginnings of agricultural civilization until about the year 1500 CE. The Hebrew Bible describes with great clarity the (rather late) establishment of Israel's version of the system, and prints it almost indelibly upon our minds and hearts as the ideal to which we aspire. This is what we long for; this is how human beings should live. This is that it is to have an identity; this is what it is to know where you belong, who your friends are and who your enemies, and how you should live.

But it is all fast disappearing now, as I first realised when in 1980 I visited an Inuit (or Eskimo) primary school in Baffin Island and found that the syllabus, the culture, the language and even the pop music being imparted to the children was indistinguishable from that in the primary school which my own younger daughter was still attending in Cambridge. We cling to our identities - just because they are vanishing so rapidly. Much of religious talk and practice nowadays seems to consist of lamentations over, and rather

ineffectual attempts to re-enact, all the things that we are now fast losing. Wouldn't it be better if we were to talk together about what is now coming upon all of us?

For is it not the case that our own tradition itself anticipated the globalization - the reversal of Babel - that we now see? The development of a single world-wide communications network, the emergence of a globally-dominant language, the English language, and the spread of a single ethic, based mainly upon the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all around the globe, is surely a very significant religious event. The choice of its motto by the BBC, a lifetime ago, shows that this was once obvious. 'Nation shall speak peace unto nation'. But today, unfortunately, we are absorbed in trying to conserve our separate identities. You have never seen, and I at least have not seen, any recent piece of religious writing that welcomes globalization as Pentecost, as a fulfilment of ancient hopes. Why not? Are we missing something?

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That is what I wrote in 1997, and here is my conclusion: Identity is dead. We are better off without it.