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Response to Tirosh-Samuels

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Response

Martin Gunderson

In her essay, “A Jewish Perspective on Religious Pluralism,” Dr. Tirosh-Samuelsan provides several arguments for religious pluralism from the Jewish perspective. To be effective, an argument for religious pluralism must produce reasons for people who are non-religious as well as for people of various religions. If, for example, we are to persuade those who are creating the global monoculture that Tirosh-Samuelsan fears, then we must find reasons that they are committed to accepting, at least insofar as they are reasonable. This produces a challenge for Tirosh-Samuelsan, since she argues from the perspective of a particular religion—Judaism.

There are two senses in which one could argue from the Jewish perspective. First, one could use lessons from Jewish history and Jewish thought that provide insights that any reasonable person should accept. Second, one could argue from the Jewish perspective by relying on premises that are accepted by most Jews, but that might not be accepted by non-Jews. From this perspective one produces arguments that may be compelling for Jews, but which cannot be expected to have force outside the Jewish tradition.

Some of Tirosh-Samuelsan’s arguments are of the first sort, and I find them tempting. She argues, for instance, that Jewish history shows that those political structures that allow diversity are more stable than those that do not. A totally convincing argument for religious pluralism on these grounds would, of course, need a great deal of historical evidence taken from a variety of religions. While pursuing this history in depth would take her beyond the scope of her essay, Dr. Tirosh-Samuelsan at least points the direction for an argument that would be acceptable for Jews and non-Jews alike.

On the other hand, some of Tirosh-Samuelsan’s arguments rest on Judaic premises that have little appeal for those who are not religious and, in some cases, little appeal for religious people who are not Jewish. She argues, for instance, that from the Jewish perspective humans are created in the image of God and that this is inconsistent with oppressing people. In order for this to constitute an argument for religious pluralism, Tirosh-Samuelsan needs another premise to the effect that the establishment of a single religion inevitably results in oppressing people in a way that is incompatible with their being in the image

of God. This, of course, provides a reason only for religious persons, but even some religious persons might not accept this argument. A religious person who believes that his or her faith is the true faith might argue, for example, that establishing the true faith does not require oppressing people in any way that is incompatible with their being in the image of God, since those who worship false Gods have drifted from God's purpose and thereby have already drifted away from being in the image of God.

There are two ways in which one might be tempted to answer this objection. One way is to say that we resemble God insofar as we have free will and that to stifle our freedom is to attack us in the respect in which we are in the image of God. This requires a convincing defense of the view that we have free will. It also requires a convincing argument that free will is the respect in which we resemble God. A second tempting answer is to claim that no one knows what the true faith is and that, therefore, responses that assume that one religion is the *true* religion are inadequate. Tirosch-Samuelsan develops an argument based on this sort of skepticism. She argues that humans cannot possess the entire truth about the divine, since the divine is infinite and humans are finite. Hence, allowing one version of the truth to prevail is to propagate error. She also follows Martin Buber in arguing that any claim of divine revelation is subject to human interpretation and thereby subject to ambiguity and opaqueness. Insofar as this skeptical argument succeeds, it shores up her image of God argument.

This skeptical argument creates its own problems, however. If no one can know the divine, it is not clear why religious pluralism matters. There are two possible answers, but both lead to further difficulties. One answer is that religion is a matter of faith and not knowledge. If that is true, however, then the fact that we cannot know the divine does not provide a reason for pluralism in the first place. Those who seek to establish one religion may simply claim that it is a matter of their faith to attempt to try to establish their religion as the one universal religion. They do not run afoul of the argument from skepticism because they are not making knowledge claims in the first place.

A second possible answer is that while we cannot know the divine in its entirety, we can at least come to know through revelation a part of the divine. Even if subject to interpretation, as Tirosch-Samuelsan claims, there is still at least some religious knowledge. This response, however, puts us back in the soup. A person with a partial revelation may say, for instance, that although the revelation did not provide the

entire truth about the divine, it at least provided enough truth to know that competing claims to revelation are false and should be overridden. We can imagine a group of fanatics arguing, for example, that although they do not have the full truth about God, they at least have enough truth to be confident that God wants a holy war against Israel. We might claim that they are sadly mistaken, but the argument based on partial truth does not justify our claim. The underlying problem is that not all oppression is motivated by a belief that one has the entire divine truth.

Working from within the Jewish perspective also raises the issue of moral relativism. Tirosh-Samuelsan is well aware of this and states that while she is defending pluralism, her defense does not commit her to relativism. There are two ways in which moral principles can be thought to be relative to a culture or group. First, moral principles can be relative in that they do not apply universally. That is, not all people are subject to the dictates of the principles. The scope of moral principles, in this form of relativism, covers only some people. Second, moral principles can be relative in the sense that they do not provide all persons with a reason for action. This is the more troubling sense of relativism that must be avoided in order to provide an adequate defense of religious pluralism. I shall refer to this sort of relativism simply as “moral relativism.”

Tirosh-Samuelsan cites principles within the Jewish tradition that apply to all people, such as principles against murder, theft, and incest. These escape relativism in the first sense and may even constitute reasons for all persons and thus escape relativism in the second sense. The problem is that insofar as they escape relativism in the second sense (moral relativism), they are not peculiar to the Jewish perspective. Her deeper arguments from the Jewish perspective escape relativism in the first sense, but do not escape moral relativism. The argument based on the image of God, for example, applies to all persons in the sense that all persons are within the scope of the argument—they are in the class of people to whom the argument applies. But, it does not provide all people with a reason for acting. This is because not every reasonable person is bound to believe the premises on which the argument rests. This creates a problem for Tirosh-Samuelsan’s defense of religious pluralism. Given that her argument is designed to motivate people to respect religious pluralism, she needs to deny moral relativism; but, as noted, principles peculiar to Judaism avoid relativism only in the sense that the principles she cites include all persons within their scope.

In the end, Tirosh-Samuelsan is caught between a rock and a hard place. Insofar as she argues for religious pluralism from the unique perspective of Judaism, she does not provide reasons that are reasons for *all* people and is thereby committed to moral relativism. On the other hand, insofar as she avoids moral relativism, she is forced to argue from principles that are not unique to Judaism, and the Jewish perspective becomes irrelevant.

The general problem that lurks behind these arguments from the Jewish perspective is that reasons for religious pluralism based on premises from a particular religious perspective are unlikely to provide convincing reasons for those who do not share that perspective. The arguments I have given against a defense of religious pluralism based on Jewish precepts can be given against similar defenses based on precepts peculiar to any religion or even to any culture-based ideology. The following is an example of such a generalized argument.

The justification of religious pluralism requires moral argument. Regarding issues such as religious pluralism, moral reasoning is primarily a method for resolving disputes and building agreement. We do not simply justify our moral views; we justify them to others. Because of this, moral reasoning requires that we find principles that are reasons for others as well as for ourselves. It could also be claimed that what separates moral principles from rules of etiquette, custom or prudence is that moral principles apply cross-culturally.¹

There are several ways of finding such principles. We can find areas where our belief systems overlap.² While this may work to resolve some disputes, it will fail to justify religious pluralism if we look for the overlap in the area of religious belief. This is, in part, because some religions claim to be the one true faith. People who hold such a view must find a justification for religious pluralism outside their religion, i.e., on secular grounds. This is also in part because an argument for religious tolerance must appeal to those who reject religion, even to those who believe that religion is little more than a dangerous superstition. It is unlikely that arguments based on religious premises will be persuasive to such people. But, what kind of secular reasons might be convincing?

I believe that we can adopt an argument from John Stuart Mill to provide reasons for religious pluralism that both have the potential to

be convincing to a wide variety of perspectives and are compatible with a number of other statements made by Tirosh-Samuelson. The argument I shall suggest is analogous to Mill's argument for freedom of speech in his book, *On Liberty*. Mill grounded his argument on utilitarianism (the view that actions, policies, principles, etc., find their ultimate justification on the basis of how much happiness they produce). Yet, Mill's defense of free speech can also be given a contractarian justification. In particular, it can be claimed that the principles that Mill suggests are the principles that reasonable people would agree on, given appropriate conditions for reaching agreement.

Paraphrasing Mill's argument, we might say that one ought to tolerate, and even welcome, diverse religious views.³ First, one might, in fact, have religious views that one would find inadequate when confronted with more compelling views. Second, even if one's own views are sound, other views might also contain part of the truth. Third, even if the other views are false, having to confront the false views forces one to be more clear about one's beliefs and ensures that one's own beliefs will not be held in the form of dogma rather than a living, vital faith.

This provides further justification for various statements made by Tirosh-Samuelson. The first and second reasons, for example, provide a way to further elaborate her statement that religious persons cannot be certain that their views are the whole truth about the divine. The third argument provides a way of further understanding Tirosh-Samuelson's statement that the vitality of Judaism requires that interpretation be kept alive and that this requires a plurality of opinions and practices.

Mill's defense of free speech is not, of course, without its own problems. Perhaps the most worrisome problem is that Mill's views on speech rest on the assumption that views can be exchanged freely in a marketplace of ideas so that the most compelling views will eventually be accepted. The problem with this assumption is that it does not hold in a society in which the wealthy and powerful can dominate the media.⁴ Regarding religious pluralism, however, this problem is mitigated by three factors. First, many religious groups have enough resources to make full use of the media. Far from being squeezed out of the marketplace of ideas, religious groups are sometimes part of the problem of media domination. Second, new forms of sharing ideas, such as the Internet, promise to be more egalitarian than old-line media, such as television. Third, in those countries in which the sepa-

ration of church and state has been achieved, religious and political groups have difficulty bringing the power of the state to bear either to crush a religion or to establish a dominant religion.

It might be objected that the arguments I have presented rest on the Enlightenment view that it is possible to find reasons that transcend particular cultures and historical periods. Postmodern philosophers might claim that there are no reasons that apply cross-culturally. It might also be argued that my position rests on a liberal political theory that has also been heavily critiqued by postmodernists. A defense of my position against all the various postmodern critiques that could be launched against it would be beyond the scope of my discussion. I do, however, believe that even if the postmodern critiques are correct, two points follow from my analysis. First, defenses of religious pluralism based on particular religious traditions are not adequate for the job. Second, if postmodern critiques of all reasons that apply cross-culturally are correct, then religious pluralism cannot be defended at all.

Postmodernism should not be dismissed too quickly, however. Defenders of postmodernism are right to be concerned with the way in which those who claim to have cross-cultural principles sometimes adopt culturally-based reasons, claim that they are universal, and then use those reasons to oppress others. This is a form of conceptual imperialism, and it may be tempting to claim that the position I am defending is an instance of cultural imperialism because it relies on reasons that must be cross-cultural. It is important to note, however, that the basic principle that we need in order to appeal to people on the basis of reasons that are reasons *for them* is a principle that respects others. One does not oppress others by treating them in accord with reasons to which they are committed insofar as they are open to discussion and reasonable. This basic principle is then used to develop a defense of religious tolerance. Religious tolerance is not oppressive and is precisely the position that Professor Tirosh-Samuels is defending. Both of us are concerned with postmodern relativism and with defending religious tolerance. We differ only in the background principles that are used to justify our positions.

In conclusion, those who want to defend religious pluralism will have a very difficult time doing so if they appeal to precepts from the perspective of a particular religion. The problem is that the reasons given

will not provide reasons for those who do not share that perspective. Contractarianism and Mill's utilitarianism provide promising approaches to the justification of religious pluralism. The great advantage of these theories is that they provide reasons that have at least a shot at being reasons for all. Those who adopt a postmodern critique and claim that there are no reasons that can be reasons for all people place themselves in a position in which religious pluralism is virtually impossible to defend.

Notes

1. This view of moral reasoning is given its most thorough and careful exposition by Contractarians who hold that we can derive substantive moral principles from the requirements of moral reasoning or rationality. Still, as T. M. Scanlon points out, one need not be a Contractarian to accept this view. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 189. For a more general discussion, see Scanlon, Chapters 1, 4, and 5. See also, Thomas Nagel, who claims that this view derives ultimately from Kant's Categorical Imperative, in Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Chapter 5. For an excellent edition of Kant's basic ethics, see Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated and edited by H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964).
2. For an extended discussion of this sort of overlapping consensus, see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): Lecture IV.
3. John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty," *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. 18, J. M. Robson, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), Chapter 1.
4. C. Edwin Baker, *Human Liberty and Freedom of Speech* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Chapters 1 and 2.