PLURALISM OUT OF THE SOURCES OF JUDAISM: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM WITHOUT RELATIVISM

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ABSTRACT

Jewish theology is compatible with religious pluralism, based on the paradigm of the Jewish obligation to live in accordance with the commandments of the Torah while accepting the legitimacy of other ways of life in accordance with the paradigm of the universal “seven commandments of the children of Noah.” Jospe here answers two challenges to this thesis, one, voiced by Christian theologians, that pluralism equals relativism, and a second, voiced by the Jewish scholar, Menachem Kellner, that there are no sources for pluralism in Jewish tradition and that pluralism itself makes no sense. In presenting his arguments, Jospe invokes a wide range of ancient, medieval and modern thinkers, probing the theological possibilities for pluralism within Jewish tradition and its boundaries with relativism. In doing so, he argues that one should differentiate between moral relativism, a non-negotiable category, and epistemological relativism, where there is room for compromise.

KEYWORDS

Pluralism; Relativism; Moses Mendelssohn; Kant; Judah Ha-Levi; Sa’adiah Gaon

FULL TEXT:

PDF

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v2i2.1425

Religious pluralism is a commonly-used term with several distinct meanings. Depending on the context, the term covers a wide variety of theological and philosophical discussions. At least four different concepts can be implied by this term, though each revolves around the central idea of different religious belief systems working together. In many cases, this term is used as synonym for religious tolerance, although the two concepts have distinct meanings. Some theologians argue that an omniscient deity, such as God, created all of the religions in order to speak to people in ways that most appeal or relate to their circumstances in life. As such, even though their customs are different, they are all from the same source. Religious pluralism is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society. It can indicate one or more of the following: As the name of the worldview according to which one’s own religion is not held to be the sole and exclusive source of truth, and thus the acknowledgement that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions.