

The Music of Dialogue

*From Chant to Polyphony, an Esthetic Reflection on
Encountering the Other*

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In his account of the relation between the self and the other, Emmanuel Levinas describes the mode of discourse as one that respects the uniqueness of the two parties involved: “As non-violence it [the encounter] nonetheless maintains the plurality of the Same and the Other. It is peace.”¹

Dialogue has too often been misquoted in contexts of rhetorical persuasion or dismissed with polite nods of indifference. Yet, the virtues of tolerance or of solid convictions, although certainly laudable in other contexts, hardly contribute to the fruitfulness of dialogue. Indeed, the “tolerant” partner, who “accepts” his interlocutor’s opposing views without necessarily changing his position, is no different

from the “intolerant” one, who remains firm in his convictions whatever the argumentation. In both cases, there is no true exchange, just an accidental

And, indeed, there is a certain charm to monophony. The virtues of Gregorian chant are being acknowledged today with renewed interest. The beauty

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overlap of views; no cohesion, indeed, no dialogue. This type of “dialogue” is monophonic in essence. The voices involved either silence the other, or let the other one ring unanswered. In any case, the result is monophonic: only one voice is heard.

of these lone voices, of their solid unity, ring true in our crowded, hectic, and fragmented daily lives. Indeed, monophony is somewhat reassuring. There are no conflicting voices. Diversity is minimized; order and discipline are

maximized. The absence of dialogue is an attractive notion and is often adopted as a protective stance, in an instinct of self-preservation. Better maintain what one has than put it up for debate, knowing that

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one might well lose it all. Yet, it is precisely this fear of diversity that was the root cause of the short-livedness of monophony. Indeed, chant was short-lived because there was no room for growth. A melody can be spun to a certain point, but it has its limitations. One can hence safely say that polyphony “grew” out of monophony. It is the introduction in music of harmony, of chords, that led to its development. It is the chords of a piece that carry the melody to hereto unattainable heights. It is the harmonic progression of a piece that assures its growth, hence its viability. Polyphony, or the dialogue between different voices, holds the keys of life. Without it, the lone voice is destined to die as it falls from the lips that uttered it. In polyphony (and we think specifically of chamber music), that voice is answered by the others, it is even further developed by the others. Musical dialogue follows certain guidelines that may be extrapolated to any

type of dialogue: the two voices maintain their uniqueness, yet they harmonize, they agree, they form a cohesive whole. Further, the intermingling of the two voices assures a progression, a development, a dynamism which characterizes life itself, and which would be impossible to attain with one voice alone.

Musical Sketches

For there to be fruitful musical dialogue, all voices must be heard, all voices must tell their own story. Were all the voices to tell the same story, we would fall back into the monotony of chant; they would sing in unison. This is what Levinas meant in the opening paragraph in his description of dialogue as that which “maintains the plurality of the Same and the Other.”² Indeed, the specificity of the parties must be preserved for there to be genuine dialogue. In Judeo-Christian dialogue, both voices must be heard. One cannot “convert” the other into itself; one cannot speak for the other. And yet, this must not lead to cacophony; the two voices must somehow “blend.”

The Composition

Indeed, the cohesion of the voices necessitates a common ground. Musically, this is achieved by thematic means. Indeed, the theme is what unites the different voices, which either incorporate or develop it. For example, in Borodin’s quartet number 2, the cello introduces the theme. This theme is then incorporated into the other voices differently. Likewise, in fruitful dialogue, the parties involved need not express the issue in the exact same terms. Indeed, each party incorporates the

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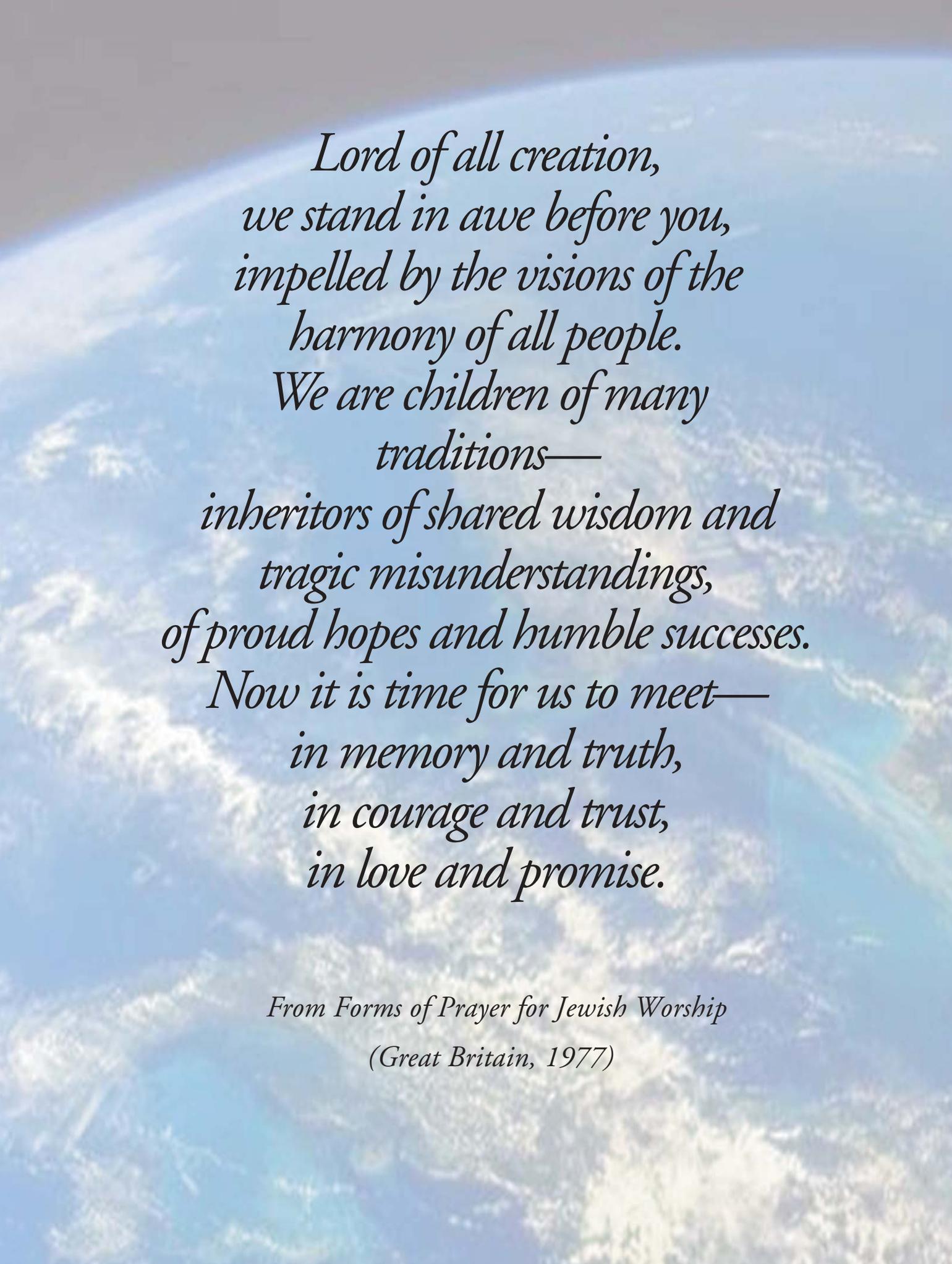
“theme” differently. Each gives the theme a slightly different ring, but it is still the same theme. Judeo-Christian dialogue might benefit from a search of the common themes and go from there. Of course, the quest for common themes necessitates that one learn from the other. In order to find the common elements between Judaism and Christianity, one must have in-depth knowledge of both. True dialogue occurs only between partners who know each other.

Polyphony as a Life-Form

The theme lives through the voices that carry it. In musical dialogue, the theme is constantly reformulated and developed. Through dialogue, the truths of both Judaism and Christianity can see themselves developed and enriched by the other. Were the two faiths to attempt a dialogue, the themes they treasure would stop sounding like stern plain-chant and swell into the textured and colorful polyphony of life.

¹Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 203.

²Ibid.



*Lord of all creation,
we stand in awe before you,
impelled by the visions of the
harmony of all people.
We are children of many
traditions—
inheritors of shared wisdom and
tragic misunderstandings,
of proud hopes and humble successes.
Now it is time for us to meet—
in memory and truth,
in courage and trust,
in love and promise.*

*From Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship
(Great Britain, 1977)*