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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

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Reel  
186

Box  
70

Folder  
958

Relation of Judaism to other religions, 1957.

57<sup>20</sup> Col. Univ. Seminar For a handbook of  
on inter-religious relations religions Oct 23 1957

"THE RELATION OF JUDAISM TO OTHER RELIGIONS"

by

DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

(sent to Dr.  
Moses J. Singer,  
Columbia Univ.)

Judaism is a universalistic faith in the stewardship of a people which regarded itself as bound to it by an historic covenant. The people of Israel was committed to carry its universal God idea and all that flows from it in terms of human brotherhood, justice and peace, to the whole of mankind. It accepted a specific discipline and a way of life, defined in the Torah, in order to insure the effective accomplishment of this mission. This discipline did not interfere with its universal spiritual and ethical doctrines which were never monopolized by the Jewish people. They were offered freely to the whole world. All men, regardless of race or status were welcomed into the faith. Some of Israel's foremost leaders and teachers were descendants of proselytes, including King David, to whom later ages traced the lineage of the Messiah.

Non-Jews who were not prepared to accept the full discipline, inclusive of customs and ceremonial laws, were nevertheless welcomed as "God-fearers". Their status was regarded as in no way inferior to that of the full fledged members of the household of Israel. Judaism never claimed to be the one and only channel for salvation. Rather, it held to the conviction that "the righteous among the gentiles will have a portion in the world to come". (Tosefta, Sanhedrin 13.2)

Its dominant hope was not to convert the whole world to Judaism but to convert the whole world to God. The one universal God does not require one universal church in which to be worshipped, but one universal devotion. Accordingly, though Judaism was determined to preserve its own spiritual identity, undiminished, in a world which was given over to powerful syncretistic tendencies, it never isolated itself spiritually, except in periods of persecution when isolation was in fact forced upon it, or when the surrounding cultures were found to be morally noxious and a menace to its own essential values.

While Judaism remained constantly aware of its own unique and revolutionary character, it never rejected opportunities to cooperate with other faiths in the building of the good society, firm in its own convictions, reverent of theirs, nor did it question their positive role in the divine plan of history. Maimonides and other leaders regarded Jesus, as well as Mohammed, as divine instruments in preparing the way for the universal conversion of mankind to faith in the one true God.

Judaism developed through the ages its own characteristic style, as it were, its own view of life, its code and forms of worship. It possesses its own traditions based on Torah and covenant. Its adherents today find inspiration and spiritual contentment in it, as did their fathers before them, and they wish to continue its historic identity within the configuration of other religious cultures. Other religions, too, developed their characteristic ways based on their unique traditions and experiences. There is much which all religions have in common and much which differentiates them. Their common purpose in the world will not be advanced by merger or amalgamation. Were all arts, philosophies, and religions cast into one mold, mankind would be the poorer for it. Unwillingness to recognize differences in religions is no evidence of broadmindedness. To ignore these differences is to overlook the deep cleavages which existed in the past and to assume a similarity of doctrine and outlook which does not exist in the present. The attempt to gloss over these differences as a gesture of goodwill is a superficial act which serves neither the purposes of scholarship nor the realities of the situation. It is far better and more practical to look for ways of working together on the basis of a forthright recognition of dissimilarities rather than on a fictitious assumption of identity. Loyalty to one's own faith can be, and should be, part of a larger loyalty to faith generally.

There are great areas of common interests in which all religions can cooperate in mutual helpfulness and respect, influencing one another and learning from one another.