

[A Modern Orthodox Approach to Interfaith Dialogue](#)

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger is Assistant Professor and Director of Urban Programs in the Department of Government and Politics at Wagner College, and serves as Campus Rabbi of the College Chaplaincy. He is founding Co-Chair of the Faith and Public Policy Roundtable. This article appears in issue 8 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

In 1964, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Soloveitchik (the Rav), the formative intellectual leader of postwar American Modern Orthodoxy, wrote that Jewish-Christian interfaith relations "must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated. In these matters, religious communities may together recommend action to be developed and may seize the initiative to be implemented later by general society." [1] In 1966 this mandate was practically formulated by the Rabbinical Council of America to mean that interfaith work ought to be about positively affecting "the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors...on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, ... Moral Values, ...Secularism, Technology... , Civil Rights." [2]

The flip side of this position emphasizing social justice work as the sole authentic purpose of interfaith dialogue was that interfaith discussion on the level of doctrinal dialogue was disallowed. Indeed, the Rav had made that point explicit. In good neo-Kantian fashion, he posited that authentic revelatory religion is ultimately a private affair and there is no point in debating it.

The Rav's existentialist bent further buttressed a philosophic argument against doctrinal dialogue. Since the human condition centers around an individual's loneliness and search for meaning through, in his model, the Halakhic life and its faith, any attempt at communication about the content of this ultimately incommunicable commitment to members of other religions would not only be futile, but a diminution of the covenantal experience itself. The Rav's position arguing for worldly civic engagement rather than abstracted theological negotiation became the Halakhic guidepost by which the centrist wing of traditional Jewry has historically measured its joint efforts with non-Jewish partners in faith.

The Rabbinical Council of America's 1966 statement crystallizing the Rav's philosophic language into praxis was a direct reaction to the Second Vatican Council's declaration of *Nostra Aetate* seeking more open, collegial discussion with Jews "especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions." [3] However earnest and positive *Nostra Aetate* turned out to be, at that early date of its initiation, and just two decades after the Holocaust perpetrated by Christian Europe, the Rav could not easily let go of concerns based on centuries of persecution of Jews, both in general but historically often taking the form of theological disputations.

Notwithstanding that historical backdrop, I am convinced that, based on his essential neo-Kantianism, the Rav really did believe in principle that it was purposeless to embark on discussions about the nature of the Divine. Nothing really serious

could come of that. Rather, shared human concerns, emanating from general religious convictions that speak to the practical needs of man in the secular sphere, would be a more realizable effort in both substance and usefulness in the material world, with which, after all, the Rav's ideal human type, Halakhic man, is most concerned.

Interfaith scholar Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn notes that the Rav never signed an outright ban on interfaith dialogue promulgated by the universally respected Halakhic arbiter Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.[4] This makes clear that the Rav's objection to interfaith dialogue was one of degree at the speculative level of joint covenantal rumination, but not one of kind altogether to the interfaith project in and of itself.

Of course, the Rav's stature as the pre-eminent Halakhist of Modern Orthodoxy makes his judgment in any arena the primary stance one has to take into account when embarking on a related effort. But, there is also a cogency to his argument on both intuitive and philosophic levels which I think was historically prescient.

On the intuitive level, if religion is ultimately about grasping for the ineffable through one's own tradition, is it really possible to communicate in mere human language, whether through argument about a particular piece of text or dogma, the universe of feeling behind that lived faith? Furthermore, I wouldn't put it past the Rav to have recognized in the early nineteen sixties that globalization and a more pluralistic bundle of identities was upon us. We had firmly left the medieval world of absolutes, and even the Enlightenment world of universal reason.

Philosophically then, we are living in a period that presumes a confidence in the authenticity of one's own cultural context, obviating the need to negotiate one's particularistic convictions. Rabbi Dr. Walter Wurzburger wrote that the Rav was a Halakhic judge for post-moderns precisely because of his "objection to the employment of modern historic and textual scholarship to ascertain the meaning of halakha," which "reflects not naive traditionalism but highly sophisticated post-modern critical thought. He insists that halakha operate with its own unique canons of interpretation." [5] In their own ways, text-based postmodern philosophers Derrida and Gadamer came to the same conclusion.

Our age is one of multiple global identities not necessarily in competition with one another, but rather ideally co-existing in their happily independent and authentic cultural lives based on their own self-understood communally transmitted truths. The Rav's thinking in 1964 on the relationship between diverse faith communities may be viewed as not just courageous for staking out a unique claim against the public tide of the time, but in fact turns out to be an apt description of current postmodern social mores.

This is the intellectual setting of a new interfaith effort called the Faith and Public Policy Roundtable. It was established to address the secular arena of public policy the Rav felt it appropriate for this type of forum to consider. In September of 2008, as the American economy was clearly on its way to a sudden and sharp contraction, a group of New York area Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders gathered as a think tank to explore whether they might develop language and programmatic ideas that could offer a way of religiously speaking to our deepest civic concerns as Americans. The agenda formulated at our founding continues to drive us: to demonstrate that mainstream religious communal figures outside the fundamentalist orbit could generate a public theology and speak to social issues as strongly and definitively as the evangelical sector.

The invitation that went out to founding steering committee members explicitly invoked the Rav's mandate to focus on shared public concerns by informing participants that "This is not a group devoted to doctrinal negotiation, but rather a think tank concerned with offering a language that joins the concerns of faith to the concerns of the polity." [6] This idea of not dealing with doctrine extended organically to any joint work on the roundtable between me as an Orthodox member and non-Orthodox Rabbinic colleagues. Our task was not to reconcile differing faith perspectives, but rather to address the polis as a religious voice concerned with public policy.

At subsequent meetings, the Rav's position was openly discussed and seemed natural. Our sense as a group of American clergy and academics is that we are living in an era during which our religious communities do not feel palpably threatened, either from outside forces or by each other. The global sensibility I think the Rav intuited is an organic part of contemporary social life.

As meetings went on, it became clear that we all hoped our activity would not only add a spiritual dimension to the public space, but reinvigorate our respective faith communities' populations to deepen their own civic engagement as well. We bemoaned the overwhelming reality we shared anecdotally that our organizations' members often lead bifurcated lives as religious adherents without somehow extending that commitment to the whole of life beyond distinctly ritualistic settings

such as prayer services. Each of us brought to the table a gnawing frustration that our communities didn't quite catch that their traditions are ultimately prophetic and seek out justice as a core value.

We recognized through 2008 into 2009 that public outrage was growing over the practices of some of our largest corporations alongside an ongoing debate about how government ought to react. It seemed clear that Americans were now reflecting upon what our democracy has come to. Perhaps this was in fact our group's time to make a case to our own communities as much as to the world at large that the religious life is an activist life demanding accountability at all levels of the human family.

It was immediately clear that the economic downturn had to be the first issue we tackled. After all, it was a distillation, all too real in its crushing impact, of values, now clearly askew, that Americans had been taking for granted in recent decades. British Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks suggests that a United States once claiming Biblical ideals of shared republican purpose as its lodestar is increasingly speaking in terms of a crass individualism supporting only the protection of private interests. The volunteeristic skin of de Tocqueville's America has been shed.[7] Political scientist Robert Putnam's famous 2001 study of the decline in American civic participation[8] only proved Rabbi Sacks' sad premonition. We've learned all too clearly by now that a political and economic culture driven solely by an ethos of privatism is unsustainable. This is where the perspective of faith and its values may step in to provide some guidance.

The Faith and Public Policy Roundtable seeks to capture the immediacy of conviction and language exemplified by public theologians of a previous era such as Heschel and Niebuhr. Those kinds of prophetic voices are conspicuous by their absence from American public life today. As our Co-Chair Rev. Dr. Gary Mills claims, "We are convinced that it is high time for mainstream, non-fundamentalist religious leadership and scholars to re-emerge in the American conversation on issues like the economy, education, war and peace, and healthcare, to name just a few." [9]

At the end of 2009 the Roundtable released its debut position paper, a Statement on the Economy. This paper illuminates the religious dimension of economic justice. It seeks to begin generating a non-fundamentalist public theology by positing essential religious values as a lens through which to evaluate policy.

To follow up on the release of the economy statement, the Roundtable organized a Call to Action Weekend for November 20-22, 2009, the weekend before Thanksgiving, which featured charitable advocacy and thematically coordinated sermons on social justice at seventy three New York area houses of worship.

The Statement on the Economy has been signed to date by thirty four religious leaders, ranging from the Catholic Archbishop of New York to major leaders representing Orthodoxy and the Conservative and Reform movements. Additionally, five major area academic and religious institutions such as Fordham University and Wagner College are hosting our statement on their websites.

Father Patrick Ryan, S.J., a founding steering committee member, put it succinctly when he stated, "This economy has opened up a window for discussion of the common values" that "bind us together as Americans and as members of the human family. Our task is to articulate those values and provide thinking on their civic and spiritual dimensions." [10] Our next task is to take on the immigration issue. To that end, we are drafting a new position paper and will host a conference in Spring featuring panelists who speak to the issue of immigration from the perspective of faith.

This has been a broad introduction to the context and mission of our Roundtable. But, as an Orthodox Rabbi, there is yet one more dimension to this work that is perhaps its most important attribute. It is to live out the wise teaching of the Rav, so sensible as *sevarah*, clearly reasoned logic, and yet at the same time so in tune with the classic *mesorah*, the fundamental tendency of the tradition. The Rav's argument is one that simultaneously speaks to justice and the observant Jew's mandated involvement with his or her world.

While the Rav correctly surmised that Torah could not be translated into neutral language, he believed that, both as descendants of Adam and Abraham, our lives as Jews are bound up with the state of our all too human universe. The Halakhic life demands a rigorous engagement with every facet of the human condition. Retreating from vigorous involvement with society at large is a retreat from humanity itself, and that is not, finally, the Jewish way.

[1] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Confrontation*, *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1964

[2] Boston College, Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/so...>

Conference, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: Forty Years Later, November, 2003

[3] Nostra Aetate, DECLARATION ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS, Second Vatican Council, October 28, 1965

[4] Eugene Korn, The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting "Confrontation" After Forty Years

<http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/so...> Boston College, Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, Conference, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: Forty Years Later, November, 2003

5 Walter S. Wurzburger, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of post-modern Orthodoxy, Tradition, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1994

[5]

[6] Letter of Invitation, Faith and Public Policy Roundtable, September 2, 2008

[7] Jonathan Sacks, The Persistence of Faith, London: Continuum, 1991

[8] Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001

[9] Faith and Public Policy Roundtable, Press Release, Fordham University, Bronx, New York, and Wagner College, Staten Island, New York, November 3, 2009

[10] Faith and Public Policy Roundtable, Press Release, Fordham University, Bronx, New York, and Wagner College, Staten Island, New York, November 3, 2009

FAITH AND PUBLIC POLICY ROUNDTABLE

STATEMENT ON THE ECONOMY

NOVEMBER 2009

In the fall of 2008, amidst the financial and political turmoil enveloping America and the world, a group of religious leaders came together in New York City to consider the role of non-fundamentalist religious voices in the American public space. Meeting regularly, this group developed consensus for approaching public policy issues. Our immediate concern is the economy in both its domestic and global dimensions.

The economic crisis is a moral issue. Therefore, our response to it must be framed in moral terms. As our President has said, if our country is to recover its prosperity--not simply for our own good, but for the good of our interdependent world--then we must reinvest in society not only with money but with a renewed sense of shared civic responsibility.

Millions of people, here in America and around the world, are suffering from severe economic distress. Unemployment and bankruptcy are increasing. Foreclosure and fraud have multiplied. Poverty persists and deepens. This has occurred, in many cases, because of a disengagement of the financial sector from civil society and neglect of their responsibilities within it.

Neither is government or the citizenry exempt from responsibility. Our civic and public institutions have clearly weakened as checks on institutional gluttony. There is a feeling on Main Street that our largest institutions, whether public or private, are far removed from the disempowered voices of America. Decisions are being made at a distance from those among us most affected by this economic crisis.

Our personal and collective responsibilities to each other, locally, nationally, and globally, are rooted in our belief in the sacredness of human life. We believe that every human being has been created in God's image and ought to be treated accordingly. This conviction suggests criteria for evaluating policy.

At all times, but especially during this time of recession, these criteria or values are: reinvestment in families and strong communities, protection of basic human rights, consideration of the common good, a weighted concern for the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable in society, stewardship of the natural world, and most importantly, a renewed sense of interconnectedness across the breadth of the human family, crossing ethnic, religious, racial, economic and ideological lines. We call for the unequivocal accountability of corporate America to America. The corporation has the same responsibilities as any other citizen of civil society. Economic profit should not exclude moral purpose.

We call on government to listen more closely to America.

Today, the narrative of Exodus and redemption from oppression calls every person of faith to action--to be God's hands in freeing God's creatures from the oppression and moral corruption to which we all bear witness. But the Exodus was not only about freedom from oppression--it was also about the forging of a just society.

The words of the prophets call on us whether as individual people of faith, as members of religious communities, or as religious leaders, to organize and work for social change. We must reinvest in our society on civic and religious grounds lest its healing be impaired.

The public message of faith today calls on every American to become more profoundly engaged in our nation's civic life through service and advocacy, to demand deeper accountability of our public and private institutions.

May the prayers of our lips, the work of our hands, and the spirit of our hearts come together to bring about a new era infused with justice, suffused with dignity, committed to the vision of a more perfect union.

For more information and to become involved, email the Faith and Public Policy Roundtable at faithandpublicpolicyroundtable@gmail.com

FAITH AND PUBLIC POLICY ROUNDTABLE
STEERING COMMITTEE

In alphabetical order

Noah Arnow,
senior student, Jewish Theological Seminary

Rabbi David Lincoln,
Rabbi Emeritus, Park Avenue Synagogue, New York, NY

*The Reverend Dr. Gary Mills,
Assistant to the Bishop for Global and Multicultural Administration, Metropolitan New York Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay,
National Education Director, Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps

The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.,
Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society, Fordham University

Dr. Henry Schwalbenberg,
Director, Graduate Program in International Political Economy and Development (IPED), Fordham University

The Reverend Jared R. Stahler,
Associate Pastor, St. Peter's Church, New York, NY

*Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger,
Assistant Professor and Director of Urban Programs, Department of Government and Politics & Campus Rabbi, Wagner College
Rabbi, Congregation Ahavath Israel, Staten Island, NY

*Steering Committee Co-chair

Signatories to the Faith and Public Policy Roundtable Statement on the Economy

New Signatory
His Excellency, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan
Archdiocese of New York

Signatories
In alphabetical order

Rabbi Marc D. Angel,
Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

The Reverend Eduardo Arias,
Pastor, Iglesia Luterana Sion, New York, NY

Noah Arnow,
senior student, Jewish Theological Seminary

The Reverend J. Elise Brown,
Pastor, Advent Lutheran Church, New York, NY

The Reverend Perucy Butiko,
Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hollis, New York

The Reverend Amandus J. Derr,
Senior Pastor, Saint Peter's Church, New York, NY

Rabbi Dr. David Ellenson,
President, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

The Reverend Sarah Geddada,
Pastor, Floral Park, New York

Rabbi Jason Herman,
Executive Director, International Rabbinic Fellowship

Dr. Serene Jones,
President, Union Theological Seminary

The Reverend Kathleen Koran,
Assistant to the Bishop, Metropolitan New York Synod,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
New York, NY

The Reverend Barrie Lawless, Pastor,
Our Saviour's Atonement Lutheran Church,
New York, NY

Rabbi David Lincoln,
Rabbi Emeritus, Park Avenue Synagogue, New York, NY

The Reverend Jonathan Linman,
Assistant to the Bishop,
Metropolitan New York Synod,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
New York, NY

Rabbi Dov Linzer,
Rosh HaYeshiva and
Dean, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School

The Reverend Joseph M. McShane, S.J.,
President, Fordham University

The Reverend Christopher Mietlowski,
Pastor, Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church,
New York, NY

The Reverend Dr. Gary Mills,
Assistant to the Bishop for Global and Multicultural Administration, Metropolitan New York Synod, Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America

Rabbi Jack Moline,
Director of Public Policy, The Rabbinical Assembly

The Reverend Daniel Peter Penumaka,
Pastor, St. Paul's International Lutheran Church,
Floral Park, New York

The Very Reverend Robert Rimbo,
Bishop, Metropolitan New York Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in American, New York, NY

The Reverend. David Rommereim,
Pastor, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church,
Brooklyn, NY

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay,
National Education Director, Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps,

The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.,
Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society, Fordham University

The Reverend Giovanni Sanchez,
Pastor, Espiritu Santo Lutheran Church, Brooklyn, NY

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld,
Executive Vice President, The Rabbinical Assembly

Dr. Henry Schwalbenberg,
Director, Graduate Program in International Political Economy and Development (IPED), Fordham University

The Reverend Kaji R. Spellman,
Associate Pastor, Saint Peter's Church, New York, NY

The Reverend Jared R. Stahler,
Associate Pastor, St. Peter's Church, New York, NY

The Reverend Donald Stiger,
Senior Vice President for Mission and Spiritual Care, Lutheran Health Care, Brooklyn, NY

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger,
Assistant Professor and Director of Urban Programs, Department of Government and Politics & Campus Rabbi, Wagner
College
Rabbi, Congregation Ahavath Israel, Staten Island, NY

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb,
Executive Vice President, Emeritus, Orthodox Union

Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg,
President, The Rabbinical Assembly

Institutional affiliations for identification purposes only