

#### **IV. No Religion is an Island: Heschel and Interfaith Concerns**

Heschel's experience of the Holocaust, in which he lost his mother and three sisters, was an all-too-real evocation of what can happen when people of religious faith do not stand up against evil and oppression. Speaking out of his Jewish tradition, Heschel saw religion as the antidote to the ills of modernity, including the problem of nihilism, which denies meaning and value. In 1965, Heschel became a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York (the first non-Christian to be so honored), and gave an inaugural lecture on ecumenism called "*No Religion is an Island.*" In that lecture, Heschel argues that religious pluralism is the will of God---that no religion exists in isolation from the others---and that, in the modern world, religious persons must choose between being interfaith or "inter-nihilistic." "The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways," Heschel writes. The 1965 lecture exemplifies Heschel's approach to and engagement with persons and institutions of other faiths, particularly Christianity.

Heschel didn't simply speak about interfaith cooperation, he lived it. In the early 1960s, he was instrumental in helping to shape relations between Christians and Jews through early and ongoing critiques of *Nostra Aetate*, a revolutionary statement on Jewish-Christian relations that came out of Vatican II. In his work with Catholic scholars who were preparing this statement, Heschel urged the Catholic church to address and reject historic anti-Semitic attitudes and teachings, which it did. Likewise, Heschel organized religious leaders of different faiths to come together to confront the violence and injustices of the Vietnam War, co-founding the influential organization Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, which included King, William Sloan Coffin, and others. At the end of his life, Heschel was still seeking out interfaith dialogue and cooperative action, visiting activist friend and Catholic priest Philip Berrigan upon the latter's release from prison for nonviolent disobedience. Philip and his brother Daniel, both Catholic priests, were among the high-profile figures from other religious traditions who joined Heschel in opposing the violence of the Vietnam War.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In the film, Shai Held says that Heschel “came to think that religious diversity was God's will, that God wanted to be worshipped in a variety of ways in a range of ways, in different languages, in different religious images.” Do you agree with this thinking? Are there multiple pathways to God or a single, exclusive one?

Considering the time in which Heschel was writing and teaching, would an affirmation of religious diversity---implicitly challenging exclusive claims to religious truth---have been risky or even dangerous? Are there religious communities that would oppose that view today?

2. In his lecture *No Religion is an Island*, Heschel asserts that, at a time when religion itself is under attack by the forces of nihilism, people of all faiths need to come together to defend the importance and even the necessity of religious understanding. Do you agree with this argument?
3. What was Heschel’s contribution to the creation of *Nostra Aetate*? How did that statement revolutionize Catholic thinking about the Jewish people? What was Heschel’s role in changing Catholic teaching about the Jews as deicides (i.e. “Christ killers”) and in regard to Jewish conversion to Christianity at the end of time? What did Heschel mean when he said that he would “rather go to Auschwitz” than be forced to surrender his Jewish identity and convert to Christianity?
4. Why was it so important that Heschel help the Catholic church reverse the historical “teaching of contempt” about the Jewish people? How had that teaching drastically and tragically influenced the course of history in the West? What did Heschel want the Catholic church’s new statement on the Jews to affirm about them?
5. Heschel had a secret audience with Pope Paul VI, who presided over many of the momentous changes that came out of Vatican II. What sort of public statement did it make that a Jewish scholar had met with a Catholic pope? Why was Heschel’s initial meeting with Paul VI so controversial?
6. Is Rabbi James Rudin right in suggesting that Heschel’s involvement with Cardinal Bea and other Catholic thinkers during Vatican II can be a model for interfaith cooperation today and for how we perceive people of other faiths?
7. Heschel was a central figure in creating Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), and he also influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. in coming out against the war, perhaps one of the most important moments of the anti-war movement. Why do you think it was important for Heschel to bring members of other religious traditions together to confront what he saw as the injustices of the war? Is this another way in which he was breaking with tradition to call people from different religious backgrounds together in common cause?
8. In the 1950s and 1960s, Heschel became friends with leading figures in other traditions, including Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and Roman Catholic

monk and writer Thomas Merton. How do these friendships exemplify Heschel's idea that no religion is "an island," and that religious pluralism was not only a good thing, but a necessary one?

9. Heschel is often described as a mystic? He was professor of Jewish mysticism at Jewish

Theological Seminary and wrote on mysticism as early as 1949 when he wrote *The Mystical Element in Judaism*. There he said mysticism presupposes "a yearning after the unattainable, a need to grasp with the senses what is hidden from the mind." How do you describe a mystic? Is there a connection between Heschel's mysticism and his involvement in social justice?