



TIME STAMP: ((1:09:26))

Rabbi Nissan Wilson

Senior Rabbi

Redbridge United Synagogue

One of the things that Roy [Professor Roy Bhaskar] used to like to do was to make introductions and one of the first people that he introduced me to was Matthew. And he said, "Well you two must talk," and I thank Roy for making that introduction and certainly from looking at your book and preparing my thoughts for this evening it's been a very enriching experience and I very much look forward to continuing this discussion because this has shown me just how much we have to talk about.

In a farewell address to mark his retirement in 2013, after 22 years as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth emeritus Chief Rabbi Lord Sachs addressed what he believed to be the greatest challenge for Judaism today and I quote from the accompanying pamphlet which was tellingly named *Judaism Engaged With The World*. "Today the two most powerful movements in Jewish life are assimilation and segregation. Jews are either engaging with the world at the cost of disengaging from Judaism or engaging with Judaism at the cost of disengaging from the world. Assimilation and segregation may work for individuals even large numbers of them but it cannot be the way for the Jewish people as a whole, not only are they dangerous they are a failure of nerve in the Judaic projects.



Can it really be that Judaism has nothing to contribute to society and to the world? Are Jewish faith and practice so fragile that they can only be sustained by being screened from all contact with other cultures?

So the greatest challenge for Judaism is that of contemporary relevance. And through my own education and background I've seen arguably successful working models amongst the segregationists and it could and has been argued that Judaism is alive and well amongst the segregationists and that there are communities that are flourishing. However in my professional life for the most part I've worked as an educator and religious leader with Jews whose identity is largely shaped by western liberal values and who are much more susceptible to complete assimilation than they are to segregation. And so if the Jewish community is not to be the batten down the hatches or allow its young people to disappear into the ether it must consider embracing those contemporary values and bringing them into a dialectic with theology and religion. The difficulty with this for educators, whether religious leaders, parents or of course RE teachers is that with young people religion often does not really stand a chance. And there are two reasons for this, the first is that the permissive values that are essential to a liberal polity are naturally enticing to young people are often keen to embrace any form of freedom or anything that promises freedom of any sort. And the second reason is that the liberal discourse is the dominant discourse in contemporary society.

So like Matthew I believe that for Judaism as well the answer lies in part in finding a philosophy that's capable of underlabouring the beliefs and practices of a religion, in this case Judaism.



So what can critical realism do? A worthy research project would be to work through Matthew's book and highlight which part could easily be applied to Judaism and Jewish education, perhaps three different highlighter pens: green, red and yellow; yes, no and don't know, or needs further research.

I haven't done that yet. I only just thought of it. But here are a few pointers. Judaism would be very much at home with the critical realist holy trinity – I know that sounds odd, Matthew has very kindly renamed it as the fulcrum which means that I think Judaism would be even more comfortable with it. Over the past couple of years I've used the basic principles of the trinity, or the fulcrum and introduced it to my students and I believe I've received quite a positive response. Shall I call it the trinity or the fulcrum I'm not sure?

Mervyn Hartwig

Call it the fulcrum because there's an example, now here we have a contribution to critical realism because I think Roy was, when he christened it the Holy Trinity he was punning on absence but he forgot about the theological situation. Not everybody accepts the Trinity so fulcrum is probably a better name.

Rabbi Nissan Wilson

Okay.

Matthew Wilkinson

It's official

Rabbi Nissan Wilson



It's official. It's a shame about the irony that's now been lost but if it does its job better we'll call it the fulcrum. It provides a way of understanding the world; maintaining strongly held beliefs while allowing the space for others to hold different beliefs all the while avoiding the pitfalls of relativism. Modern Jewish scholars have pointed out that the etymology of the Hebrew word amanah which is usually translated to faith actually doesn't mean blind faith but really implies, and a close look at the etymology really implies that what it means is rational trust. And it means living a life almost of seriousness, but living a life with full commitment but that is based on rational belief, that is based on rational trust. In other words judgemental rationality.

In its simplest form the fulcrum is a strikingly simple way of underlabouring for a Judaism engaged with the world, to use Sachs' phraseology. I should also add here that perhaps above all I see critical realism as providing a framework or a methodology or underlabouring for emancipatory social research. A critical realist approach allows for a critical analysis of the value dependent perspectives of both lay persons and researchers. The need for reflexivity is well understood by critical realism being implicit in the critical realist understanding of epistemic relativity. The researcher must know that her knowledge is socially produced, value-dependent and always open to revision.

Judgemental rationality though mediates this relativism by accepting that there are good reasons for accepting some beliefs over others and what follows on from this is the possibility of what is termed in critical realism, explanatory critique. This is a form of critique whose aim is to understand why a false belief is held, by identifying what social structures are prevailing factors in sustaining a particular belief it is possible to go



beyond a philosophical critique of a belief and consider what structures might need to change.

Just a few words about dialectical critical realism and the philosophy of meta-reality. There it really gets more complex. We had a discussion at a seminar last term, Paddy spoke as well, about Judaism's ethics and the critical realist ethics during which I highlighted some of the key differences. With regard to the philosophy of meta-reality we're getting into really difficult territory. Last summer I'd been attending the critical realism reading seminars and I'd been struggling with the philosophy of meta-reality, as I'm sure many people had, but approaching this from the perspective of the Jewish theological tradition I found many of the ideas intuitive but the overall structure had an attraction for me. My thoughts were somewhat crystallised when I attended a presentation by Andrew Wright at the ((1:17:08?)) Conference in July and Andrew outlined what he referred to as the epistemic commensurability and the ontological incommensurability of the philosophy of meta-reality and in that case he was referring to Christianity. But for example the questions Matthew referred to before ((1:17:24?)) referred to it as well, the God versus the absolute, are these the same things in Judaism and in other religions I'm sure as well the idea of thinking of God as a person, how does that square with the absolute and where the philosophy has a well-developed ontology how does that ontology compare with the well-developed ontology of Judaism?

To conclude I mean only to flag up these questions, as Mervyn said it's only an invitation to reconsider and I would perhaps highlight in yellow with a note to refer to Matthew's work and discuss with colleagues more knowledgeable than myself. I think that one of the great challenges in bringing together two very different traditions into dialectic is really one of



A Fresh Look at Islam in a Multi-Faith World:

a philosophy of success through education

Book launch at UCL Institution of Education

Tuesday, 2 June 2015

language, simply sometimes a philosopher and a theological may use very different words yet mean more or less the same thing. But also they may use identical words and phrases that mean exactly the opposite.