

## Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Chosen-ness

We, the CCJ, I suspect, are not simply about defending the other's right to express their particular religious tradition; we are also concerned to understand *what* it means to be religious in the other's tradition. This means developing sensitivity to our different senses of notions we share.

One notion we share is "chosen-ness". The sense of being chosen by God – an experience in the biblical narratives of ancestral kinship, kings, prophets, or in Christian texts, in Mary among women, Peter among the apostles, Paul appointed by Jesus – can be *uncomfortable*. Sometimes it is more than uncomfortable. It becomes provocative when the corollary, 'you others are not chosen', is added, and is particularly concerning when chosen-ness depends on an adversary. Finally, the idea of 'being chosen' has a negative connotation in certain contexts, such as the superiority (formerly) felt by Western Christianized Europe, who used it to justify their programs of colonization and religious conversion.

Tonight I will explore chosen-ness in its various perceptions, hopefully, to arrive at some positives.

My PhD research involved, in part, the psychoanalysis of Thérèse of Lisieux, a young Catholic nun from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who died from tuberculosis at 24, and a study of the landscape of her time: French Catholicism, and its so-called 'enemies'. Thérèse felt increasingly 'chosen' to carry out a mission. Her sense of this was perhaps not as spectacular as some – such as, Joan of Arc – though it's telling that she used Joan as a symbol for her own efforts.

Many people report a sense of 'feeling chosen' by God, in feeling favoured by God, sometimes, feeling appointed to help or defend God – against 'God's enemies'.<sup>1</sup> But when this feeling is projected outside of ourselves, universalized to an absolute – so that we view ourselves as 'objectively' chosen by God, and others as *not chosen* because, in our estimation, they undermine *God's order*, it can be destructive.

Yet it remains that we all have some sense of our existence as chosen, as having a unique purpose, feeling this with lesser or greater intensity – some *even* feeling seized by it. An experience of chosen-ness appears to be, if not integral to our faith expression, at least, a dimension of it. For this reason, it might be helpful, first, to link this religious phenomenon to its psychological basis by reviewing religious faith development in the individual person, then follow with some thoughts on chosen-ness from the Jewish perspective, from Rabbi Gunther Plaut, and the Christian perspective, from Catholic Professor Gregory Baum.

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<sup>1</sup> For reported senses of God, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (NY: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982, 1985).

Three observations can be made with respect to religious faith development:

- (i) The development of a Self and our sense of God is inextricable.
- (ii) Our sense of God is primarily a *felt-knowing* – which eclipses intellectual-knowing when we're in distress or crisis.
- (iii) Our religious faith builds onto our 'primal trust' faith – a product of our being inherently relational – that we originate from other persons.<sup>2</sup>

We begin life with an undifferentiated sense of self and other. After birth, safely held in our mother's arms, the whole world can be said to be felt as our mother's holding: "a structureless sea offering the same friendly environment in limitless expanse."<sup>3</sup>

In the goal of becoming a differentiated self – or 'self-becoming' – the very young child has the sense of a *benevolent*, absolute power entirely in its favour, acting against whatever might threaten it. This felt sense becomes the material for the child's sense of God.

As an infant we have the least power to self-determine, our sense of agency (authoring our own acts) only develops to the extent that it is helped by someone who values us as a distinct other, and helps to equip us, sensitively, and unobstructively.<sup>4</sup>

Winnicott suggests that the child develops a sense of self by constructing an interior world based on the experience of their earliest physical reality. (This internalization becomes how they make meaning of the world, and importantly, it helps them to predict and anticipate present and future relationships.)

The "good-enough" mother creates a holding environment, where in a negative sense, she preserves the child from hunger, abandonment, 'punishment' and loss; in the positive sense she values the child by affectively engaging with it, she lifts the child, opening up the world for exploration, stimulates and prolongs affective connection, and relieves the child from affective disorganization. By favouring the child (a form of choosing), she enables it to grow in its abilities to become the agent of its own acts.

Using principles as set forward by Winnicott and Rizzuto (via object relations theory):<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These insights are drawn from John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion: On Faith and the Imaging of God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> From Michael Balint in *Thrills and Regressions* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), 85.

<sup>4</sup> See Mary D. S. Ainsworth, *Manual for scoring maternal sensitivity*, 1970, in L. Alan Sroufe, *Emotional Development: The Organization of Emotional Life in the Early Years* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 166-67.

<sup>5</sup> See Donald W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London, New York: Karnac, 1965, 1990); Ana Maria Rizzuto, "The

1. Our experience of God is based on our early relationship with our primary other.
2. We have both positive and negative senses of God. In a positive sense, God connotes plenitude, the 'more', the greatest wonder, the sweetest repose. In a negative sense, God's purpose is to defend us, not just from death, but from a negation of the self.

In many of the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures, God is a powerful defender who protects the most vulnerable, and enables the self-determination of those who are limited in their powers. These narratives parallel what is entailed *developmentally* in our becoming a *self*. The psalmist, seeing his limitation and the threat of enemies ('rejecting' others, sickness, or death), calls out for help, and that help is appropriately called 'gracious', because it resembles parental grace. A knowing, stronger (taller) one, stoops to lift their child, helping them to act out their wishes.

'Being an infant' is an ideal symbol for describing those who lack agency, who depend on an advocate (what a parent is for their child): the poor or oppressed, hence, Israel itself, a whole culture under threat.

Thus religious faith is connected to our primal trust. It builds on experiencing one's mother as primary nourisher and saviour, to become an ultimate omnipotent saviour – who chooses foremost to defend us, gives us purpose, and, not least, offers herself in relationship.

We must add, however, that if during our emerging self-becoming, our primary caregiver is unresponsive, devaluing, or even violent toward us, *and* names God as aligned with this treatment, we find ourselves with a dangerous god who has to be discarded for the sake of a healthy self to survive. To be against the 'god' which threatens me is a source of 'atheism'. In sum, when all is well, we feel that God chooses us, both in the origination of our particular life, and by being on *our* side.

As an infant, it is acceptable, even necessary, to seek chosen-ness (*favour*). This *belongs* to the God who facilitated our 'self-becoming' to maturity. Even as a grown person, when we suffer losses, and are threatened by lack of power, we pray to a God who already favours us. This interaction with God, however, seems to belong to our interior life. It does not seem right to exteriorize this, as felt-injustice relates to where I stand. Thus, it seems unacceptable to align my external environment with my feelings (as an *objective* truth) – or to deem those who threaten me also God's enemies.

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Psychological Foundations of Belief in God," in *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity* (ed. James W. Fowler and Antoine Vergote; Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett Co, 1980).

In the archetypal sense of chosen-ness – the prophetic one – one is chosen from obscurity to fulfil a mission set by God. A key element here is reluctance: ‘it’s not my idea – my life’s circumstances brought me here’.

Finally, before moving to Jewish and Christian perspectives, we observe that chosen-ness can be inverted – we are chosen by virtue of our response to God (e.g., by responding to the ‘Torah’, or by accepting salvific forgiveness). The idea that we are chosen through our ‘choosing God’, however, introduces a problem: don’t we only choose God with the freedom first given us by God? How might we describe the freedom God gives us?

Having touched on this phenomenon in terms of psychology, we turn to a dialogue on chosen-ness between Rabbi Gunther Plaut and Professor Gregory Baum from a paper, “Jewish-Catholic Dialogue on Divine Election”, in *The Ecumenist* (1978).<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Plaut, a Doctor of Laws and Reform Rabbi from the Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, begins with ‘The Divine Calling’. An example of felt-chosen-ness may be seen in the prayer “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has chosen us from all tongues, who has sanctified us with his commandments ... chosen us from all nations ... lifted us above all tongues.” He observes this part was removed from the Reform prayer book for some 50 years, but has now reappeared. He then recounts for us the “waxing and waning” of chosen-ness through its various reinterpretations.

### **Traditional**

Jewish history manifests one simple conviction, that Israel was God’s chosen. This, from the days of Abraham, meant numerous descendents, and blessing to all mankind through the ages. If Israel is faithful, the world at large will see salvation. So, there is an inter-relation between God, Israel, and the rest of humanity – if all is well with Israel, the world is well; if Israel is ailing, humanity is sick. Indirectly, this means fate is in the hands of the Jew: God and man wait on the perfection of the Jew. This conception (of Jew and Gentile) seems “to us,” in a people who number less than one percent of humanity, as self-centred (glorifying in our choice, potential, and hope), yet, in proclaiming itself as the guardian of human faith (willing to suffer ignominy and martyrdom as its father’s punishment ‘of love’) as also an onerous responsibility.

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<sup>6</sup> “Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Divine Election”, in *The Ecumenist: Journal for Promoting Christian Unity*, Volume 17, No 1, November-December, 1978. This address by Rabbi Gunther Plaut and Professor Gregory Baum was delivered at the fourth Annual Conference on Jewish-Christian Relations, February 1978, under the chairmanship of Rev Peter Gilbert, director of Christian-Jewish Relations, Toronto.

## Post-Enlightenment

Today, Jews, as a whole, no longer subscribe to this self-view. Accepting equality of nations and religions changed this. It was now felt that Judaism, while not necessarily good for all persons, was good for Jews. (Who, however, would confer the right to equality amongst peoples of different religious senses?)

Second, the Shoah was monstrously out of proportion to any correction that a loving father would deal; it silenced even believers.

Third, the rise of Israel as a nation, ironically, led it to become merely one among many nations, and to reinterpreting the idea of chosen-ness, or simply abandoning it altogether. It also led to the natural (secular) Jew.

From this, three secular self-views ensued, which, Plaut notes, derived their values from human existence and *not* from an ultimate source. A sense of chosen-ness was felt to be a device to psychologically, and thus physically, stand up to persecution. (But, I ask, doesn't the ultimate reside within? God's advocacy for survival, self-determining, and being-in-relation, *can* be described pragmatically, as an a-religious necessity, but it might also be understood as *how* God works, as at the very heart of religion.)

1. Many felt that *self determination*, such as nationalism, was part of a natural law in the human person, a normal and expected way for human cultural organization. Here the 'why' of Jewish existence was left aside – simply '*entitlement*' to unique and cherished ethical and cultural bonds was asserted. Attached to this was a belief that this would lead to great cultural contributions to humanity. 2. *Kibbutzim* – farming the Palestinian desert using commune principles – expressed a kind of salvific Jewish socialism stripped of its cultural and religious characteristics. 3. Religious humanists (mostly Diaspora Jews who felt that if all move to Israel – Jewishness will be lost) asserted that a "vague, general, universal force" leads to human salvation – being and acting Jewish in terms of its ethics.<sup>7</sup> A beneficent ethical genius exists in us, and we pass it onto the world – representing something no other can give.

## Chosen-ness and Faith

Plaut asks: "but is this true?" While Jewish literature, family life, and ideals are unique, and do enrich the world, cannot the same be said for other contributions? Plaut feels Jewishness has not survived because of its uniqueness; their contribution is their *belief*. They *believed* in their covenant with God, in God's faithfulness; they believed in their "divinely determined status." And so the "old" chosen-ness refuses to go away. There's a renewed recognition that the Jewish way has always related to God – its history points to a caring, choosing God.

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<sup>7</sup> Plaut and Baum, "Jewish-Catholic Dialogue on Divine Election," 3.

Against the presence of the 'natural Jew', with their economic and political concerns, we have to account for the 'supernatural' Jew, who speaks of purposes and goals ultimately connected with God.

Towards reinterpretation, some located the quality of choosing *in* the Jew, traceable to the midrashic tradition that it was *the Jew* who chose to say 'yes' at Sinai; to enter covenant. There is another midrashic tradition that tells that Israel was given a choice, but – when facing God's enormity – felt its freedom suffer limitation (here choice becomes a matter of being or not being).

Thus Jewish self-understanding regarding chosen-ness needed reinterpretation, together with its relationship to other religions. Franz Rosenzweig suggested that: Judaism is the keeper of the flame, and Christianity is the one that took the flame and brought it to the nations. Though not the same flame, they share a common source and fate. Plaut observes that oppression sometimes led to greatness, but sometimes, in its effect of warping and misshaping, led to believing we were superior, and that the prayer "who has chosen us from every nation," "who has lifted us above all tongues," was, in a sense, borne out in history – all a Jew had to do was to look above to see "the ravaging, pillaging ... mob ... to cast him more securely in [the] conviction that he was indeed superior" (not that this helped in the moment)!<sup>8</sup>

### **Chosen-ness and Uncertainty**

So, if the old notion of chosen-ness is inadequate, what is chosen-ness? In history, at the crucial moment, uniquely, a people together chose "*not* land, might, or military power, but *service* to an unseen God." It agreed to be God's messenger, which entails saying 'yes' to the uncertainty of one's fate. We are now aware (with the event of the electro-microscope) that reality is not fixed, that "the very act of looking alters the nature of that at which we look". In hindsight, our task was perhaps what we achieved, and to remain a messenger waiting for God, uncertain of the nature of our task.

We move to Gregory Baum's thoughts for the Christian perspective: A Catholic Theologian and sociologist, Baum was an advisor during the Second Vatican Council, at the commission responsible for the documents, *On Religious Liberty*, *On Ecumenism*, and the editor of *The Ecumenist*.

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<sup>8</sup> Plaut and Baum, "Jewish-Catholic Dialogue on Divine Election," 5.

He begins with what he sees as distinctive in Christianity: the emphasis is not on human responsiveness but on Divine initiative. God “has chosen people and comes close to them in Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> He then describes three self-understandings of chosen-ness in Christian history: first of *the Church*, then, of *souls*, and, finally, of *humankind*.

(i) The early Church’s self-perception was based on two senses: the fulfilment of biblical promises, and a yearning for Jesus’ return (the end of days). Three distinct interpretations follow, one that would hold damaging consequences for the future. 1. Luke/Acts involved reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles to produce a third race, as it were, beyond these former groups – *only* this group had a destiny. 2. In Matthew’s Gospel, old Israel is felt to have been unfaithful to its covenant, and the peak of its unfaithfulness is the rejection of Jesus – thus they are no longer God’s people. In mercy, God makes a covenant in *Jesus* – the Church is the new people of God, and now the sole inheritor of his blessing. This notion of substitution is felt in the later John’s Gospel, and in Christian self-understanding in the Middle Ages. 3. Paul, in a different view, sees Jesus and the ensuing Church, as grafted onto the Jewish tree – a tree planted by God – branches have been cut off to make way for this insertion. Israel cannot be lost; however, until they accept Jesus as “The Holy One of Israel,” they lose God’s presence. The early Church, viewing itself as the ‘new’ or the ‘true people of God’ replacing Israel – a self-identity based on being ‘*against those*’ who are felt to threaten – while harmless during a time of minority – was profoundly destructive in a time of majority, leading to the Jews as becoming the outcast of the Christian world.

(ii) In the second period, when the Church assumed power and synonymy with the Roman Empire, to be distinctive, it took on a focus on individual passages of sons and daughters that God chose (the Catholic Church has a proliferation of saints and their hagiography). This stretches to the modern time.

(iii) “A contemporary view”. Baum (passing over the Protestant Reformation, which saw many discard the accumulated traditions of such as Thomism and Roman hierarchy, and return to the orientations of the early Church) arrives at Vatican II, Catholic reform. Here new biblical metaphors (such as ‘mystical body’, and ‘pilgrim people’) were proposed for the Church-elect, whose previous image had been ‘marching forward to a perfect society – a city of God’ (which often focused on removing the threat of heresy).

Vatican II documents, responded to ‘who is Church?’ and ‘what is its task?’ with: the Church ‘is a people addressed by God in history; human “*history* is the locus of divine grace,”<sup>10</sup> and humanity as a whole is destined for salvation’ – because God has chosen *humankind*.

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<sup>9</sup> Plaut and Baum, “Jewish-Catholic Dialogue on Divine Election,” 6.

<sup>10</sup> Italics added. Plaut and Baum, “Jewish-Catholic Dialogue on Divine Election,” 11.

The Church's task is to be in solidarity with the human race – to bear the burdens of others, and (like Christ) “to serve God's reign in the whole world” by building “a more human world.”<sup>11</sup> Christians are concerned with, and responsible for, *all humanity* as that is whom God has chosen.

This leaves us with some ambiguity: God chooses *all* humanity. Is there something that God does not choose?

So, what is the way forward for religious faith, with respect to chosen-ness? It seems to be more than defending particular senses. It is perhaps about integrating those we already have. By attending to the working of our psyches from developmental psychology, and viewing facts “as our friends” – as not alien to belief in God but integral to it – we find that the emphases in each tradition correspond to stages of moral development, diverse personalities, and psychological conditions. Hence their value and richness in everyday life! God as the protector of my ‘self’ is something shared by religious belief *and* psychology. God *is* who makes life possible, who makes me sacred, who watches over me, protects and defends me against all enemies – especially that which renders me insignificant, that which annihilates my identity, or my purpose. In the Psalms, we see God as the preserver of my life, my identity; *ultimately* God is the preserver of a ‘me’ for the possibility of a ‘we’ (the heart of Martin Buber's observations). If I cannot be an ‘I’, then I cannot function in relation.

**Judith Schneider, CCJWA Committee Member**

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<sup>11</sup> Plaut and Baum, “Jewish-Catholic Dialogue on Divine Election,” 11.