

“Thinking about Difference Differently:” Boundaries of Jewish Peoplehood
A Response by Nancy Fuchs Kreimer to Jerusha Lamptey

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In a recent class on “Religious Leadership for a Multifaith World,” I asked the students to introduce themselves by saying what was at stake for them in the topic of religious diversity. What did interfaith have to do with their lives? Convinced as I am of the importance of the topic, I still found the length of their responses amazing. One student even seemed puzzled by the question. “My parents grew up in two different religious traditions, I practice a third, my spouse and his entire family come from a fourth. I am a chaplain in a hospital where I work with colleagues and patients of every faith and none. Is there anything *but* interfaith?”

In my favorite cartoon, someone asks a fish, “How’s the water?” to which the fish responds, “What’s water?” Interfaith is the water in which many of us swim. It is becoming our natural home. Thus, the question of religious difference could not be more timely and important.

Jerusha Lamptey goes a long way toward deepening that conversation in this article (and in her pathbreaking book, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*).¹ Lamptey’s core insight is to bring together the conversation about gender difference with one about religious plurality. She introduces readers to the work of a group of contemporary women interpreters of the Qur’an regarding sexual difference, and shows how this scholarship can be a resource for a rethinking of difference in general, and religious difference in particular. In doing so, she helps us to—in her words—“think about difference differently!”

Lamptey insists on reminding us of the connection between theology and the practical issues of how we live. As I hope to show, these theoretical issues of hierarchy and boundaries have real life implications for Jews. Not only do they connect to some of the most hotly debated topics in the Jewish world today, they also carry implications for how we understand the why and how of interreligious engagement. For Lamptey, academic questions are also questions that matter to our communities—or should. It is one of her insights that I especially appreciate.

In this response, I will explore two of the key themes that emerge from Lamptey’s work. The first concerns the issue of hierarchy, and the second that of boundaries. I will suggest that in the early work of Judith Plaskow, the first Jewish feminist to call herself a theologian, one finds insights about hierarchy (both gender and religious) that run parallel to those of Lamptey’s scholars.² Comparing Lamptey’s work with Plaskow’s helps us to lift up the distinct way in which this issue emerges in the Jewish context in contrast with the Islamic.

That discussion will lead us into the second theme, that of clear and static boundaries that are understood to unambiguously divide humanity. Lamptey’s exploration of the limitations of

¹ (New York: Oxford, 2014).

² In Lamptey’s book, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Plaskow’s work is cited and discussed, along with that of other feminist theologians who deal with this issue. See p. 105.

thinking about religious boundaries pushes us to deepen a discourse that is already emerging on the edges of the Jewish world. Here, I turn to the recent work of Shaul Magid and Noam Pianko, two scholars who are reimagining Jewish peoplehood. I suggest that they are pointing us to new territory that Lamptey's thinking can help us to navigate.

I will begin by laying out the problem of religious difference as it presents itself in Jewish tradition. Briefly (and much too simply) Judaism, like Islam, presents us with—in Lamptey's words—a “tangle,” although in quite a different way. On one hand, Jewish tradition holds that God created all humanity from the same two parents and that all human beings carry the image of God. Furthermore, our texts do not claim to have the whole truth to which all others must assent if they are to be saved. Judaism is not, in Paul Knitter's terms, an exclusivist tradition. Indeed, it acknowledges that others also have truths and access to God.

On the other hand, Jewish tradition makes a clear distinction between the Jewish people and “the nations.” Some strands of Jewish tradition press this theme of privilege—of ontological essence—more than others, but even secular Judaism has a version of the chosen people trope in certain chauvinistic concepts of Jewish peoplehood. Unlike Islamic tradition as described by Lamptey, where hierarchical evaluation is reserved for individuals and group difference is divinely willed and lateral, Jewish tradition tends to locate hierarchical difference precisely in group membership.

Consider the traditional blessings said at the end of the Sabbath. We praise God for distinguishing between the holy and the ordinary, light and darkness, the Jewish people and other nations, and the Sabbath and the other six days of the week. While the world is made up of the ordinary as well as the holy, darkness as well as light, the nations as well as the Jews, and workdays as well as the Sabbath, we hear in this blessing the honor and esteem in which the holy, light, and the Sabbath are held, as well the Jews. This prayer thanks God for making those distinctions. In the morning blessings, we explicitly thank God for making us Jews (or in the traditional formulation, for not having made us non-Jews); in Orthodox Judaism, Jewish men thank God for not having made them women (a parallel that will become relevant when we look at Plaskow's thinking).

As with Lamptey's Muslim women writers, Plaskow's thinking about sexual difference offers an important connection to the rethinking of religious difference—an intersection that Plaskow herself notes. In *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow takes on the gender binary dividing male from female in Jewish tradition, and the costs of that “habit of thought.” She sees in binaries a necessary hierarchy with all the spiritual injury that entails. Plaskow argues that this is problematic not only for women; it carries over to the “subordination of sexual minorities, non-Jews and other groups.” She suggests a different approach to difference, both with regards to gender and for Jews and others, one that Lamptey might call “lateral.”

Plaskow suggests replacing chosenness as a model for Jewish self-understanding with a “less dramatic” term, “distinctness.” As she puts it, distinctness suggests that the relationship between various communities, such as Jewish and non-Jewish, “should be understood not in terms of hierarchical differentiation but in terms of part and whole.”³ She argues that one can value

³ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 105.

particularity better through “the distinctiveness that opens itself to difference.” Thus, a feminist rethinking of gender can have implications for how we understand ourselves as Jews in a world of religious diversity.

A word about hermeneutics: Plaskow does not claim to have found this approach within Judaism. On the contrary, she acknowledges that the hierarchical way of handling difference is “deeply woven into the fabric of (our) texts and traditions.” Plaskow owns her authority (never separate from her community) to move beyond the textual tradition. In this way, she is operating with different hermeneutical assumptions than Lamptey—and the women upon whose work she relies—who recognize and honor the ontological status of the Qur’an in the Muslim tradition. As Plaskow puts it:

I see Judaism as a huge, often unwieldy and contradictory bundle of texts, traditions, laws, practices, folkways and so on that constitute the past and establish the foundations for the future of the Jewish people...Jewish communities can sort, reconfigure, and add elements to the bundle that makes up Judaism, drawing on those parts that best serve our needs. The core of tradition is not a given but a subject of fierce and ever-renewed debate.⁴

Once establishing that the Jewish/non-Jewish boundary can be articulated in a way that describes difference but not hierarchy, we turn to the next question Lamptey raises: How closely bounded are the entities of which we speak? Lamptey critiques a conception of religious difference that is “intimately tied to clear and static boundaries.” She argues that it “leads to an excessive focus on the boundaries themselves and on the process of identifying that which demarcates a boundary.” This theme, too, presents challenges for Jewish understandings of the “other.”

Plaskow is not unaware of that issue as well. She reminds us that a Jewish community that “marshals strength at its boundaries” can often do so “at the detriment of the center.” But Lamptey pushes us further. The boundary becomes important as a way of dividing insiders and outsiders. Problematically, the marker “is depicted as clear, static, and unambiguously defined.” For Muslims, the boundary is defined by belief. In the case of Judaism, it is in defining who is a Jew—who is “us” and who is the “other.” But the question Lamptey raises is the same for Jews: How closely do we police the boundaries and insist on static lines of distinction?

As Daniel Boyarin argues in *Borderlines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity*, in the first centuries of the Common Era, the fuzziness of existing borders was intentionally eradicated, creating clear boundaries between Judaism and Christianity that henceforth would be rigorously enforced. He speaks of “fetishizing borders and boundaries,” and the depiction of religions as “separate, hermetically sealed compartments.” Building upon Boyarin, Lamptey writes: “Such rigid and static compartments do serve a cognitive function, but they are also a gross simplification of religious identity and interaction. They present religions fully purged of all fuzziness, complexity, and hybridity.”⁵

⁴ Judith Plaskow, “The Coming of Lilith,” *Four Centuries of Jewish Women’s Spirituality: A Sourcebook*, eds. Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 18.

⁵ Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other*, 72. The quotations from Boyarin are in Lamptey’s text.

I live and work in the segment of the Jewish world that is most in touch with some of the radical changes going on in our society, changes that are impacting Jews and Judaism and how we define ourselves in relation to the “other.” These include: post-ethnicity; the emphasis on voluntary affiliations (assent) rather than inherited ones (descent); dual and multiple religious belonging; people changing religions in the course of a lifetime; and, finally, intermarriage as a demographic reality. For better or for worse, we are living into that future and trying to figure out how to respond.

Liberal Jewish communities today are made of people with two, one or no Jewish parents; people who have converted to Judaism; and people who simply are joining in some aspect of Jewish living, fellow travelers for parts of the journey. The Jewish people are no longer a tightly bounded entity, and certainly not an essentialist, static one. As Shaul Magid puts it, “The multiethnic and multiracial nature of the American Jewish family can and already has redrawn certain boundaries related to practice, belief, identity.”⁶

If feminists have helped us understand the constructed nature of sexual distinctions, and softened some of the boundaries within Judaism in practical ways (for example, women wearing men’s prayer garb, or serving as rabbis), what could a similar approach to the boundaries between Jews and others mean?

Noam Pianko points out that what Magid describes above can be seen as an extension of the insights of Plaskow and others. As he explains in *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation*, scholarship in the last three decades—including and under the influence of feminist scholarship—has replaced “static boundaries, essential characteristics, and shared histories” with “understandings and expressions of porous borders, fluid identities, and constructed histories.”⁷

In light of these changes, Pianko suggests we think more about the “what” of Jewish life than the “who,” and suggests—helpfully I believe—that alongside the “Jewish people” we focus on the “Jewish project.” He asks, “What are the ... boundaries for a group defined by individuals engaging in various ways in the Jewish enterprise?”⁸ These are some of the questions my colleagues and I have been asking ourselves as our pews are increasingly filled with “others” who want to participate in Jewish communal life. In the Jewish world at large, these conversations are very much alive and often fraught.

For example, when Shaul Magid first began drawing attention to post-ethnic trends in American Judaism, Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer issued a strong response:

Whereas [Magid] applauds the shift to a porous, self-constructed, and voluntary ethnicity, we doubt it is “good for the Jews.” We take wary cognizance of post-ethnicity and urge American Jews to contend with it, rather than surrender.⁹

⁶ Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 242.

⁷ Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2562. The page numbers cited here correspond to the Kindle version of this book.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2917-2918.

⁹ Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, “What is So Great about Post-Ethnic Judaism?” *Sh’ma*, March 1, 2011.

Rachel Adler—a leading Jewish feminist theologian—offers a nuanced approach to boundary maintenance for Jewish peoplehood.¹⁰ While Adler speaks eloquently about the rich learning that comes from cultural sharing and cross-fertilization, she also asks hard questions about boundary crossing. Adler is far from advocating separatism; indeed, she says we should cross borders to build relationships and to grow—yet she insists that the borders should be there to be crossed. If a Jew chooses to “live in the borderlands,” to “transgress” the boundaries through—for example—marriage to a non-Jew, that requires honest reckoning. Adler does not share the anxious tone of those who decry every intermarriage or new demographic study as the end of the Jewish people. But she sees the need to police the marker between insider and outsider, even as we cross back and forth to learn and to grow.

From Lamprey’s discussion of bounded religious entities, I gain insight into this conversation that I had not had before. I had long since agreed with Plaskow (and Mordecai Kaplan before her) that it made little sense to speak of a hierarchical relationship between Jews and other peoples. Yet I had seen the “leaky” borders of Jewish peoplehood and the blurring of distinctions as a sociological reality with which we needed to cope, not appreciating the way in which this development parallels a move to understand religious difference as more fluid.

This is not a simple issue. Indeed, for Jews, it is one fraught with fear. Monitoring our borders is tied up for us with our very survival as a people. Neither Magid nor Pianko nor I are suggesting that the Jewish people should somehow cease to exist as a defined entity. But perhaps we might want to embrace with less handwringing the reality that the Jewish community is less bounded and more permeable than before. What Lamprey helps me to appreciate is that the flux we are experiencing—the shifting of definitions of who is inside and who is out—is part of a different way of thinking about difference, one that acknowledges identity as multifaceted and dynamic, thereby inevitably changing the nature of groups and the borders between them. We can double down on policing at the edges, or we can begin to explore new opportunities both in our Jewish settings and in the interfaith encounter.

Which brings us back to my opening reflection: interfaith is the water in which we swim. What are the implications of this discussion for interreligious encounter? Lamprey argues convincingly that how we understand religious difference will impact what we consider to be appropriate forms of interreligious interaction. How does “thinking about difference differently” open new possibilities for finding value in the encounter with other faiths?

As the discourse within the Jewish world shifts, so will our understanding of other religious communities and the reasons to engage with them. As our Jewish questions change from “Are we the chosen people?” to “Who constitutes the ‘we’?” and from “Can rabbis perform intermarriages?” to “What is the role of non-Jewish family members in our communities?” so, too, does the what and why of dialogue.

¹⁰ Rachel Adler, “To Live Outside the Law You Must be Honest,” *The Reconstructionist*, Spring, 2004, <https://www.rrc.edu/sites/default/files/legacy/reconstructionist/Spring2004.pdf>. In a private conversation with Adler (February, 2016), she confirmed that her views have not significantly diverged since then.

Will Herberg's classic *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* depicts interfaith engagement in mid-twentieth century as "the triple melting pot," where each religious community came to the table as a clearly defined, bounded entity. In the decades after World War II, Jews and Christians unpacked their troubled history and made great strides in building supportive relationships between their groups. Since then, important work by historians and theologians has advanced our understanding of each other while, on the ground, Jews and Christians—joined more recently by Muslims, Buddhists and many others—have built coalitions to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

The addition of groups to the ever-expanding multifaith "Noah's Ark" is only the beginning. More importantly, it is no longer clear (especially to the next generation) that we encounter one another *as groups*. Rather, as the boundaries of our communities become more fluid, people define themselves less through solidarity with particular religions and more as individuals with complex, often multiple sources of identity. Thus, interfaith engagement becomes an opportunity for seekers and practitioners to share spiritual teaching with one another. What has each of us learned from the wisdom traditions in which we are located? How can we help each other navigate the challenges of cultivating character and building compassionate communities? These conversations will not replace the necessary dialogues between groups. But they will enrich the already robust social change work engaged in together by people of faith.

Let me close with a postscript: gratitude, and a plea. I am deeply appreciative of Lamptey for her contribution and all the rich thinking it will provoke and inspire. In this piece, I have only scratched the surface of Lamptey's complex and nuanced arguments. Hence, my plea: Read her book! And learn more, too, about Lamptey's new venture, a program on [Islam, Social Justice and Interreligious Engagement at Union Theological Seminary](#). We are all blessed by her model of a scholar/activist who asks profound questions and takes her answers back to the world and its problems.

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