

Understanding Understanding, the Foundation of Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to explore the academic approach to interreligious dialogue by outlining some key features of what the author sees as its philosophical foundation: understanding. It argues that understanding what it is to understand is crucial to developing interreligious dialogue because, at its core, the goal of such dialogue is the exchange of differing religious understandings for mutual benefit. Thus, the author contends that a thorough academic perspective on interreligious dialogue can only be established if a robust account of understanding is first constructed. Having addressed this, the author outlines three key features of understanding: subjectivity, internality, and appreciation of the whole. Following this, a curious aspect of the generation of new understanding is explored, namely the seeming link between leisure, the absence of so-called “servile” work, and the generation of new insights. Whilst this collection of key features is by no means exhaustive, this paper seeks only to open a conversation on the nature of understanding that has been noticeably absent from philosophical and theological discussion in recent years. Given this, the author hopes to open avenues through which others might critique, explore, or add to the features identified in this article in order to expand the neglected field of the Philosophy of Understanding.*

Keywords: Understanding, Interreligious Dialogue, Insight, Internality, Leisure

Interreligious Dialogue and the Necessity of Understanding

The necessity of the academic study of interreligious dialogue is only increasing in the modern day. In our so-called “Information Age,” it has never been easier to converse with people from a diverse range of religious cultures and worldviews, which naturally increases the importance of understanding how such conversations can best be used to benefit cross-cultural intellectual development. In order to make the most of this discourse, however, we must first come to know exactly what it involves.

It seems that the main purpose of interreligious dialogue is the exchange and cross-pollination of religious worldviews. A priest should make it their business to seek the wisdom and perspective of a rabbi in order that their conversations might provide new insights into their own impression of the world. Rather than such conversations leading to conflict or religious doubt in any of the participants, such interreligious dialogue, *when conducted properly*, can instead act as an opportunity for the expansion of each religious worldview in reflection of the wisdom of others.

How then, are we to know how to conduct interreligious dialogue properly? Well, as with most subjects, the best place to start with such an inquiry is at the intellectual foundations. It has already been stated that the main reason we should seek out interreligious dialogue is to better our own religious worldviews through learning from the worldviews of others; so, the intellectually foundational question becomes “What is a religious worldview?”, which in turn yields the question “What is a worldview?”

The term “worldview” saw its philosophical definition crystallized in the work of Thomas Kuhn,¹ whose use of this word applies most explicitly to the philosophy of science. Despite the scientific basis of Kuhn’s work, however, it takes little effort to make his theories more generally applicable, as the general foundation of Kuhn’s theory is that worldviews consist of a network of understandings of the world. At any given stage of a person’s intellectual development, they will have a worldview made of a patchwork of different understandings, be they scientific, theological, political, *et cetera*.

If worldviews are composed of a patchwork of varying understandings of the world, then the job of clarifying the notion of a worldview must start with an understanding of what it is to understand. Furthermore, since clarifying the nature of a worldview is necessary in order to understand how interreligious dialogue can be most effectively carried out, a clear picture of what is necessary for such dialogue to operate effectively is only possible after a satisfactory account of understanding is established.

With this goal in mind, the following two sections of this paper seek to lay out some of the philosophical foundations of understanding in a theological context. First, I will lay out and explain three key features of understanding, before developing a section devoted to the ways in which new understanding can be catalyzed. By establishing these features of understanding and coming to understand, it is my hope to clarify some of the foundations of interreligious dialogue in order to establish an academic picture of this all-important practice.

¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this paper, I have endeavoured to lay out the importance of gaining an understanding of understanding for the academic discussion of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, I have sought to lay out both three key features of the mental attitude of understanding—internality, subjectivity and appreciation of the whole—and a notable contributing factor to the process of coming to understand, namely passive or leisurely insight. It is my hope that the content of this paper might spark further discussions in this field and that, through these continued conversations, our academic picture of interreligious dialogue, and our understanding of understanding, will become clearer in years to come.

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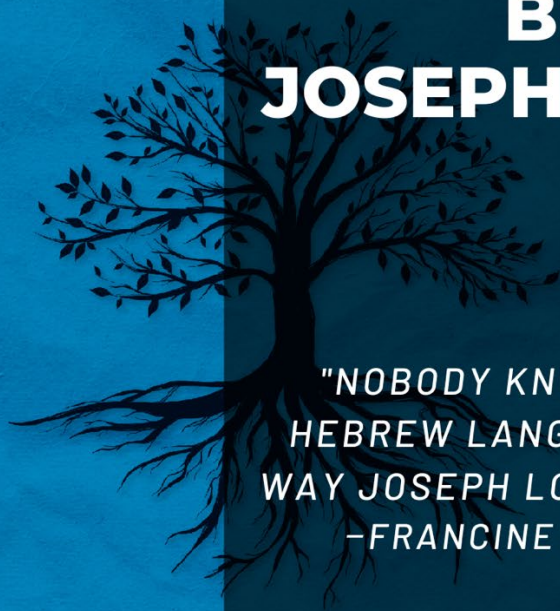
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HEBREW MATTERS

**BY
JOSEPH LOWIN**



*"NOBODY KNOWS THE
HEBREW LANGUAGE THE
WAY JOSEPH LOWIN DOES."
-FRANCINE KLAGSBURN.*

110 HEBREW ROOTS
THE ROADS THEY TAKE
THE STORIES THEY TELL