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Response to Tirosh-Samuelson

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Response

Lucy Forster-Smith

It is a deep honor to participate in the International Roundtable. What I hope to do in this brief response is to consider this instructive essay not so much from the viewpoint of critique, which is often in the academic community an opportunity to look at the holes, the gaps, the weaknesses of an argument—the proverbial cup half empty—but to recognize the contributions that elucidate the problems and the challenges of religious diversity at Macalester College. To do this, I will begin with what I understand in Dr. Tirosh-Samuelsón’s essay to be a powerful historic comprehension of the particularity of Jewish history as it has been culturally contentious when it has engaged attempts at turning particularity into universality. Within that effort I will lift up several specific themes that awaken us to the way the religious history of Macalester College (and specifically the religious expression and plurality) might be addressed by her most helpful insight. Secondly, I will propose a way to understand the religious history of Macalester College as a rich and fertile one in which the seeds of diversity and global expression have germinated but also one that continues with amazing resiliency to call forth the necessary groaning in travail as we give birth to a more vibrant and diverse college community, which brings with it the spiritual life of its heritage. Finally, I will reflect upon this as the Chaplain of the College and from my own religious tradition, Christianity.

Tirosh-Samuelsón raises some key points for our consideration as we look at the impact of globalization on a particular religious community. The very sweep of the essay brings with it a process of plurality: in the investigation of the ancient history of Judaism and the struggle of claiming identity within a multiplicity of cultures; in the intra-religious struggle of Judaism, which considers its own identity or identities in the family dialogue in the move from diaspora to having a national identity in the state of Israel; and in the analysis of the advent of Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism in our century. She then explores the role of religious tradition in contemporary life and recognizes that we are facing another day when religious groups face

the threat of homogenization through globalization. Tirosh-Samuels on provides a compelling process for thinking through our religious diversity. For her, the key is to root our investigation and the positioning of religious pluralism in a particular history. She says:

I would like to focus on one aspect of the ‘global moment’ — homogenization of culture — from the perspective of Jewish historical experience. I turn to history because I believe that knowledge of the past is necessary for addressing the problems of the present and the challenges of the future... Minimally, knowledge of the past is necessary so that we will not make the same mistakes our predecessors have committed.

Not only does she deal with pluralism, but also her recognition of the challenges of globalization to religious pluralism mark the territory of our consideration.

Moving from the overall schema of her essay to the more specifically illuminating points which give guidance to our own considerations of religious diversity at Macalester College, I highlight four. First, and most compelling to me, is her recognition that in a state of diaspora Judaism has survived and, in certain circumstances, thrived. This is not to gloss over the painful reality of that history which, of course, risked annihilation by the atrocities of the Holocaust. But the helpful guidance Tirosh-Samuels on provides is the reminder that this people have in their stock the same observation of the midwives when the Pharaoh of Egypt ordered them to kill all the male babies of the Israelites. They declared, “These Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are so vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1: 19). Of course, there was collusion with the people of Israel by the midwives against the Pharaoh in this moment, as well. But something in the vigor and indomitable spirit of the women and men in community would not be shaken and even in exile the identity of the community gained strength. Our speaker reminds us that this dynamic is a driving force in her argument for religious diversity.

Second, her compelling questions relate to complex issues of identity. What gives rise to identity for Jews crosses the boundaries between the personal and communal as well as the religious and political.

Third, and related to the second, is the contentiousness of a demand for loyalty to a community in the context of the larger loyalties that

come from being a part of a nation and holding citizenship in both places. Where does the ultimate loyalty lie? And can these coexist?

Fourth and last is the point that multiplicity and not unity is the governing principle in the created order. Her caution is well taken, yet this is not unbridled multiplicity but one that is rooted in the point that we are all subject to our understanding (literally, standing under) the true oneness which is God and God alone. She says, "does not Jewish monotheism itself legitimize the struggle against contending gods? Not in my humble opinion." She goes on, "Jewish monotheism, as I understand it, is compatible with pluralism because it asserts that true oneness belongs only to God and not to humans... Oneness and truth belong to God because God is the Creator of all things and all things ultimately owe their existence to God." Further, this understanding is set in the context of humanity being created in the divine image. Thus, "any attempt to diminish the humanity of another person or another group is a sin against God."

The contentious nature of the claim for Jewish identity has undergone tremendous and often tragic scrutiny throughout history. My own religious tradition, Christianity, has a scathing history in its attempts to repress and, at times, drown the identity and practice of this remarkable group of people. It was heartening when Rabbi Raskas handed me a letter sent on the eve of Rosh Hashanah by the Archbishop of New York to the Jewish community. In the letter, he speaks of the Pope's call for a day of repentance, Ash Wednesday, in the new millennium period of Jubilee wherein Catholics will reflect on the pain inflicted on Jewish people by Catholic Christians in the last millennium. He calls for a new era in the new millennium of the Common Era. Through engaging Tirosh-Samuels' essay, I have come face to face with my own place in this collusion and also have gained insight that I could never have come to if I stayed within my own limited assumptions as a Christian.

This leads me to look at the contributions and challenges this essay brings to my work as Chaplain in an historically Presbyterian college which, by that very mark, understands itself to necessarily be religiously diverse and embody other diversities as well.

I have given my response the title, "Contending gods: Monoculture or Multifaith." In considering it, I will weave the four points cited above

through my comments. Edward Duffield Neill, founder of Macalester College, wrote these words in 1885 in his address entitled, "Thoughts on the American College:"

Truth is the expression of the divine intelligence anywhere, and under any form. While the manifestation is varied, there is unity in the diversity and bigots in science or theology can never effect the divorce of reason and revelation . . . the American College is established for soul advancement, and it teaches that the system of Christ alone promotes the highest soul culture . . . He who leaves college without any acquaintance with the proof that Christ lived on earth, died on the cross, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, is a half-educated man . . . The college that has been described differs from those which inculcate the forms and tenets of any particular branch of the church. There are colleges, however established for purposes of making bigots. The students are not allowed to worship except under the form of a particular sect . . . The American College is not built upon this narrow a foundation.¹

To our late twentieth-century ears, this sounds as bigoted as whatever particular sects Reverend Neill was railing against, but for that particular time in history, his word is heard as a voice that is striving for pluralism of expression. As one part of the diaspora of the educated who stood on the frontier, which must have looked like a wilderness to them, his was an uncommon voice. He had a piercing vision of what might lie out of view in the spirit of the students he and his colleagues were given the charge of educating. He, like so many educators at that time, was trying to see the distinct mission of education and also to wrestle with the multiple voices of the Enlightenment's contributions, seen in the contentious co-mingling of science and religion.

Edward Duffield Neill leads us to the question of identity and multi-faith/religious pluralism which Tirosh-Samuels' essay raises so helpfully. The position she forwards is that religious identity places us in the particularity of our history as a college. To be sure, some of that history, as she points out, is surely an embarrassment, as it has often used the tactics of the oppressor to oppress others. But that religious identity also, in the instance of Macalester's Presbyterian identity, has spawned a particular kind of educational institution — non-sectarian, clearly comprehensive in its quest for academic freedom, seeking out diversity, understanding service to society as normative and essential if one is to hold true to the faith on which this college was founded, respect for others, and holding fast to a vision of nature

and revelation, the divine twins. The values, which are currently under review in President McPherson's efforts to clarify Macalester's core values, came out of that same pluralistic impulse in this institution. The concern for diversity/multiculturalism, service, and internationalism arise from the soil of our religious commitment and history. They are hallmarks of the Reformed theological understanding of religious tolerance and the mission efforts of the Presbyterian Church, which has taken the tact of working within other cultures to enhance that culture's own work through medicine, education, environmental teams, and ministry. Those partnerships have brought the globe to Macalester. And, of course, a core value is service (which goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway): since we have received so abundantly from God, so also we are called to give to others.

I think the challenge of Macalester College in 1999 is not so far afield from the Macalester of 1874. But the question that arises out of the foundations of this institution is what are the contending gods at Macalester College? If historically the monoculture of this institution was Christian and Presbyterian, is there a new monoculture that drives this institution? And if there is such a driver, how does it square with our history, is it what we want, and how does it shape the educational enterprise we are undertaking to prepare our students for their leadership in the new millennium?

Today, the prevailing ethos of the academic world and our global moment is secularism. Langdon Gilkey, in his book *Naming the Whirlwind*, considers the backdrop or "secular spirit" that pervades the contemporary world. He describes it this way:

The modern spirit is radically this-worldly. We tend not to see our life and its meanings as stretching out toward an eternal order beyond this existence, or our fortunes as dependent upon a transcendent ruler of time and history . . . Consequently, whatever knowing we can achieve will deal with this limited environment, and whatever meaning we can find in our short life will, we feel, depend entirely on our own powers of intellect and will and the relative historical and communal values we can create—and not on the mercy of an ultimate heavenly sovereign.²

Does this mean that the founding principles of this college are irrelevant in this modern/postmodern academic community?

I do not naively want to reclaim 1885 as the banner year by which we model our educational enterprise. Quite the contrary. We live at a

time in history when the technology is moving us closer to one another. And yet, at this moment, we are confronted with the boundaries cast by the modern world, such as secular/sacred, faith/reason, religious/spiritual, practicing/non-practicing, church-related/non-sectarian. However, we are beginning to long for connections and, thus, the blurring is not so much along these lines but: where does meaning come from? Why live? Is life worth living at all? And this puts us face to face with the mission of this college and why we educate and for what we educate.

If the frontier takes our gaze beyond the contending gods of secularism and sacred in this academic community, where do we find ourselves looking in the coming millennium? Is the very jealous god of academic excellence, which drives the faculty, administration, and staff to compete with our referent institutions and harbors deep resentment for anything that smacks of being too sublime or light weight or non-publishable, one that, in and of itself, stands to be challenged? Do the attempts to claim our heritage and honor our identity carry with them the possibility of bringing us into relationships of respect and unity? It is here that the value of religious plurality, which holds the voices together and honors the consonant as well as the dissonant under the larger assumptions of the untamed Spirit of God, may be the silent partner in this dialogue. Tirosh-Samuelsan reminds us that "Divine truth is infinite; it can never be exhausted by one human version of it. Put differently, if we allow just one, partial, version of the infinite truth to dominate all others, we necessarily propagate error and commit injustice by oppressing, marginalizing, or obliterating other visions of reality." But the contentiousness that continues to fuel such efforts will be there as well. This question, then, must be raised: do we tame the contentiousness or do we recognize that true plurality holds the door open for truth to come in from a multiplicity of voices including the spiritual? And this is to the heart of Tirosh-Samuelsan's understanding that multiplicity and not unity is the governing principle of the created order. So, also, in our educational life.

Let me be clear. I think there is institutional arrogance that privileges the voice of the secular over that which represents the religious history of this college. Is the monoculture at Macalester a secular humanistic culture that keeps at bay anything that verges on spiritual life? Or is it an academically driven institution that has lost sight of our task, which is education for life — not just for graduate school or for well paying jobs. It may be an act of defiance to take our religious her-

itage very seriously, not as monolithic but as it has been, pluralistic, willing to understate at times in order for the statements of others to be heard, and to challenge those practices which undercut our educational goal of preparing students for leadership in the world.

The destiny of the globe teeters on the brink of that frontier. The time has come to recognize the power of diversity not only in inclusiveness of the voices or ideologies but also to see the history of this college in informing the identity of so much at Macalester—from the way we structure ourselves to the academic freedom in the classroom, to the diversity of our campus, to having a voice at the table. If we go the way of being cut off from the gene pool of our origins, we will quickly seek any identity that comes along and lose our grounding.

In the final section of my response, I would like to draw the focus even closer and look at the questions of history and pluralism from my position as Chaplain of this College. When I interviewed for the position of Chaplain, well-intentioned representatives from the student body, faculty, and administration told me not to expect much as far as interest in the religious life at Macalester. In no uncertain terms, they shared with me that students might have some interest in spirituality but organized religion was of little interest. I appreciated their candor and it gave me pause, I must admit, as the offer came to me to join this community as its Chaplain. The pause was not so much on the organized religious expression part. That has been quite a common dynamic in all settings I have served as Chaplain and in a state university ministry. What was pregnant in my pause was a question: If this college is historically affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, and if it continues to hold that affiliation in a very self-conscious way, then has the institution lost its own history? Is it a relic to be displayed only when it is advantageous financially or as a distinction? Deeper still was the wondering if the life of this institution in its current form was at all shaped by the history of this church tie in the way we live our life together. Or was chaplaincy simply the last vestige of the church tie, which is brought out at convocations to say a prayer and otherwise is buried in the bowels of the chapel to take care of the spiritual needs of students?

The issues addressed at this Roundtable do not have the luxury of staying at arm's length in today's academic environment. The concerns

that Dr. Eck raised in her opening lecture to launch this Roundtable wind their way into the ongoing conversations of students, faculty, and staff here at Macalester. Often it happens in catacomb-type settings where the subject of religion won't be misconstrued. Under one roof, this college houses religious diversity too vast to fully account. The largest numbers go to Roman Catholics and Lutherans, which combine to represent about 1/4 of our student body. Presbyterians and Jews come in next at about 6 percent each. A host of Protestant denominations combine to make up another 10 percent and we have about 22 Moslem students, 11 Hindu, Eastern Orthodox, and too many others to name. We take up our crosses, or sign the cross on our bodies, put on our yarmulkes, we bow in prayer in the mosque, we assume the lotus position in meditation. We damn it all; we bless it all. Living under such a diverse canopy carries with it choices. As I stated, the Presbyterian heritage of this college, by its very birthright in the Reformation, carries with it an assumption that all traditions and, more recently, those people with no tradition will be honored and challenged. We have represented that diversity in the range of religious student organizations from Pagan, to Moslem, to Catholic, to Baha'i. We have three Chaplains, really four, two Jewish, one Catholic, and my position, which is to oversee the whole and represent the heritage of Macalester. The question that continues to puzzle me as Chaplain is how can we continue to understand and carry forward the vision of our founders and the affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (which, by the way, was not terribly anxious to underwrite this struggling little institution when approached at the turn of the century) and to do so in this day when historic ties with the Church are seen as anti-intellectual, an embarrassment, or only appropriate when approaching a donor who happens to be Presbyterian.

There is a temptation on the part of this institution to do to our Presbyterian/Christian roots what has been done to women and minorities throughout history—to silence the voice by either assuming we know what it is going to say before it says it or to simply not allow that voice to speak at all or to let it come in but on the terms of a secular, monolithic mind that harnesses the Spiritual at the expense of retarding our full human potentialities. What would happen if the Macalester ethos was one that was truly comprehensive in scope? Instead of seeing such a great divide between reason and revelation, what if we opened the door widely to the revelatory presumption in our work both in and out of the classroom? Let me be clear. I am not proposing that religion take

on a confessional tone in any classroom setting. But holding the informing religious understandings of our students, faculty, and staff at bay becomes another form of bigotry that silences the voice of reason as tied to revelation.

This time in history brings with it a generation of students who, like those Hebrew women of the Egyptian captivity, bring extraordinary strength and resilience in the face of tremendous pressures, which challenge them in assuming their place in history. This is the first generation, Dr. Martin Marty reminds us, that has been raised with post-modernism assumed. To negotiate the high waters of the technological rapids, to live in a world of relativism and continuous scrutiny of all values which were once enduring, to be awash with secularism, and where religion is only one category of commitments (which is highly suspect and, as our Governor says, "only for the weak-minded"), this generation of young adults brings to bear powerful cultural realizations. But the view from my office is not one of despair for a vanishing religious life. Rather, what I see and hear and smell is the cast of young people who are unwilling to segregate their commitments. They are seekers who are unwilling to let any dimension or resource of life go untapped and that includes spiritual. They are weary of being seen only as consumers and they despair at economic, social, political, racial, and sexual injustice. Their indomitable spirits emerge strong and hopeful and they are optimistic about their capacity to address these issues.

Closer to home, in the academy, this generation carries with them the contending gods of the monoculture and multicultural. The contentiousness of these gods comes to the forefront when the students try to make sense of their future. Rather than being satisfied with the modern reality of globalization that attempts to blot out difference, this generation of seekers await an education that is truly pluralistic, in the sense that Tirosch-Samuelsan has suggested. There is a need to curb our appetite for power and control in this engagement, and I suggest that the only way this is possible is through the spiritual life. In the spiritual life we are indeed placed in relationship with the Holy or the Universe and thereby find our desire for power and control kept in check by the *other* individual or group.

In closing, what we have here at Macalester is precisely what Tirosch-Samuelsan elucidates: a context for fearless, disarming, unabashed religious pluralism, which takes its shape both in and out of the classroom. What has brought us to this day, when we can recog-

nize the challenges and possibilities of this expressed pluralism, is our religious history as a college. Like a holy gene pool, it swims in the mission and the mansions (read, halls) of this institution. Our memory is short at Macalester. Maybe that is one of our genetic flaws. But the pillars, like the drift logs I saw on the banks of the Puget Sound this summer, have not drifted far from their home shore. They are indeed washing toward the new shores of the twenty-first century, and in those pillars are traces of the roots and the soil out of which they grew and which gave them their meaning. Maybe those particular values are not the sustaining ones for our future, but the common link between those and that of the next millennium will be the spiritual values which defy space and time restriction and which take us to the realm of quantum connection and locate us in this place in new and contentious ways. The contending gods are defiant but they are embroiled in the most important work one can be: that of the quest and claiming of the human soul, linked to time and space and earth and heaven and even to this place, Macalester College.

Notes

1. Edward D. Neill, "Thoughts on the American College," *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* (St. Paul, Minn.: The Pioneer Press Company, 1885), 4–5.
2. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963), 39.