Pondering God’s perfection

Christian and Jewish scholars from across the globe gather in Jerusalem to talk about the Almighty

By ORIT ARFA

If, according to biblical prophecy, the nations of the world will ascend to Jerusalem to learn the word of God, then an apocalyptic event of small proportions occurred during the week leading up to Christmas.

Close to 100 Christian and Jewish scholars from Israel and around the world gathered at Mishkenot Sha’ananim overlooking the walls of the Old City from December 20 to 23 to discuss and grapple with “The Question of God’s Perfection,” the title of an academic conference put on by the Herzl Institute, a research institute dedicated to intellectual renewal in the areas of Bible, philosophy, politics, and Zionism.

Over the course of four days, intellectual discussions about God’s nature as it unfolds in the Hebrew Bible served as a bridge between what has, perhaps mistakenly, been regarded as a marked difference between Christian and Jewish approaches to theology – no, not the idea of the Holy Trinity versus the Jewish ideal of monotheism (this major difference was largely set aside) but, rather, the Christian notion of God being “perfect” versus the biblical notion of God being “in flux” as He interacts with His creations.

Presenters included leading theologians and philosophers from both the Jewish and Christian tradition, including Moshe Halbertal of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Lenn Goodman of Vandervel University, Alan Mittleman of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Oliver Crisp of the Fuller Theological Seminary, Alan Torrance of the University of St. Andrews and Shmuel Trigano of the University of Paris.

“I’d like to spearhead a renewed, serious intellectual effort to get God and Torah back on the table,” said Jerusalem resident Yoram Hazony, the president of the Herzl Institute and a well-known American-Israeli author, thinker and scholar on the subjects of Jewish political thought, Bible and Zionism. An open, philosophically layered reading of Hebrew Scripture.

“The conference was preceded by a weeklong workshop for young Christian and Jewish scholars in the fields of religion, philosophy and theology, to groom a new generation of thinkers, particularly in the realm of interfaith academia. This was the first time that Joshua Martin, a student at the University of Toronto, visited Israel, studied Hebrew texts closely with Jewish scholars and also developed personal friendships with Jews.

“I realized from reading Jewish writers that they were very comfortable living with tension within the religious text, whereas in my experience we were quicker to solve the tension in the text by theological categories,” he told In Jerusalem during a lunch break on the second day of the conference. “I learned to be both attracted to and repelled by the text.”

He acknowledged that as he studied the biblical sources with Jewish scholars, he sometimes held back his instinct to jump to the New Testament or to air Christian theological interpretations, a sentiment echoed by Justin Hawkins, a lecturer on ethics and a graduate of the Yale Divinity School. But delving into the Jewish approach, Hawkins realized, could actually enrich his faith.

“They take the Old Testament far more seriously than we do, unfortunately....When you take it that seriously, it makes it so much more illuminating for the ‘sequel,’” Hawkins said.

One participant noted that no Muslim scholars were in attendance. According to Hazony, while the conference was open to applicants irrespective of faith, no Muslim scholars applied. Not surprising, he said, given that the Hebrew Bible is much more of a preoccupation of Jews and Christians.

“We’ve been doing philosophy so well, and they’ve been doing Bible so well,” said Hawkins, “that if at the end of the conference the Christians learned to take the Old Testament as seriously as the Jews did, and the Jews learn to take the resources of philosophy as seriously as the Christians do, then it will have been a successful conference and the beginning of a new academic movement.”

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