Jewish Response to Spring 2018 McGinley Lecture

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I would like to begin by thanking Fordham University for its hospitality; Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for as always meticulous and gracious attention to every aspect of the preparation; and most especially to Father Ryan for inviting me again to share this evening with him. I know how he cherishes these lectures, and your presence here.

I suspect that the reason he asked me to respond to his paper is to bear witness to his insightfulness and acuity. And I have to say, as is always the case Pat has raised a very tantalizing question which gives me the chance to reflect on things from a perspective I would not have explored without the gift of his challenging question.

I would begin by saying that his depiction of the role of imitation in Jewish tradition is exactly right. I would hastily add that in the Bible Isaac seems to devote himself exclusively to imitating the deeds of his father Abraham; and that the account of Joshua’s acts seems to a great extent an imitation of what Moses had done before him. But then I must depart from Pat’s presentation and suggest that when he first mentioned to me the idea of imitation my mind turned to the question of the most significant kind of religious imitation. So I will focus on the idea of what is called in Latin *Imitatio Dei*

Does the idea of Imitation of G-d play a role in Jewish religious thought? Actually for me this question can be answered most clearly if it is situated in a constellation of religious attitudes which need to be examined together.
I would have us begin with the issue of anthropomorphism. We are all familiar with the phenomenon of projecting person-like qualities onto the deity. It is commonplace to argue that we can see in the Bible an evolution of the way G-d is understood. But at some levels that understanding clearly is anthropomorphic. Just two examples of a Biblical presentation of G-d as having physical human-like properties:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Exodus 24: 10-11

Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

Exodus 33: 21-23

Hands, feet, back, face: there is no denying that this is an intensely anthropomorphic perspective. That reflex to anthropomorphism was continued and amplified by the rabbis. Just one example:

R. Johanan says in the name of R. Jose: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers? Because it says: Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in house of [Beit T’filati, literally] My prayer. It s
not said, 'their prayer', but 'My prayer'; hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers. What does He pray? —R. Zutra b. Tobi said in the name of Rab: 'May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.’ It was taught: R. Ishmael b. Elisha says: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me: Ishmael, My son, bless Me! I replied: May it be Thy will that Thy mercy may suppress Thy anger and Thy mercy may prevail over Thy other attributes, so that Thou mayest deal with Thy children according to the attribute of mercy and mayest, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice! And He nodded to me with His head.

B Talmud Brachot 7a

It is in this context that we can begin to look at Pat’s question from another perspective. If anthropomorphism involves understanding of G-d in the image of humans, then the Jewish ideal must be understood not so much as *Imitatio Dei* but rather as theomorphism—the aspiration to have human beings understand themselves in the image of G-d.

The locus classicus for this perspective is the very first chapter of Genesis, however vague and perplexing this gnomic statement might be. According to Genesis the story of humanity begins with G-d’s statement, “I will create humans in My image, after My likeness… And G-d created humans in His image in the image of G-d created G-d
them” (Genesis 1: 26-27). It is in this context that we can understand the first of the constellation of perspectives that address the human resemblance to G-d.

Yes, there are times when Jewish tradition is explicit in talking about the imitation of G-d. Foremost among these is Leviticus 19 which begins, “You shall be holy because I the Lord your G-d am holy.” Sidestepping, for a moment the daunting issue of the meaning of holiness, I think it is instructive to take note of what—to paraphrase Micah—this chapter inter alia requires of us: honoring our parents; providing for the needs of the stranger, the fatherless and the widow; fairness and impartiality in court proceedings; love of our neighbors; honesty in our business dealings.

We hear the theme of Imitatio Dei sounded in the repeated injunctions to “walk in G-d’s ways” (Leviticus 19:2, Deuteronomy 10:12, 11:22, and 26:17). Significantly it is sounded in two of the most salient commandments in the Torah. G-d’s love of the stranger becomes the basis for the obligation to love the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). Similarly it is the rationale for the observance of the seventh day as a day of rest (Exodus 20: 10-11 and, by implication Genesis 2:2-3, though not in Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

In a way the Book of Jonah might also be read as a lesson—albeit a paradoxical one—about the issue of Imitatio Dei. I have argued elsewhere that this is the very purpose of including it as a reading toward the conclusion of the afternoon service on Yom Kippur/the Day of Atonement. As you will recall in this story G-d forgives the Ninevites for their transgressions instantaneously. Jonah responds to G-d’s act of forgiveness by being enraged. For whatever reason he cannot forgive. Of course it should be noted that Jonah is not depicted as admirable—nor as a role model. Which brings us to
the question of why is this book is read on the Day of Atonement. I would suggest that it is read as a positive lesson about G-d and a negative lesson about Imitatio Dei. As we come before G-d in atonement, it reminds us that G-d does forgive. We can be forgiven. But we also learn from Jonah’s inability to forgive that we, must be unlike Jonah, must be G-d-like. We, too, must forgive those who come to us in atonement for what they have done to us.

The rabbis return with some frequency to the idea that the fundamental task of human beings is to imitate G-d. They assume, with Rabbi Levi ben Hama, “If one worships idols, he becomes like them. Should one who worships the Lord not become more and more like God?” (Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:12). In Exodus Rabbah 30: 9 we read:

The attributes of the Holy One blessed be G-d, are unlike those of a human being. A person may instruct others about what to do, but may not practice it themselves. Not so the Holy One, Blessed be G-d. Whatever G-d does, G-d commands the Israelites to do as well.

In other words every quality attributed to G-d must be thought of as an attribute we must aspire to in ourselves. The idea is sounded with some frequency in rabbinic texts. One rabbi, named Abba Saul put the matter explicitly. In his commentary on Leviticus 19 he says, “What is the duty of the retinue of a king? To imitate the king” (Sifra 19:2). He also wrote, “Be like G-d. As G-d is called merciful and gracious; so you be merciful and gracious. As G-d is called righteous; so you be righteous. As G-d is called holy; so you be holy” (Sifra 85a). The same idea is stated more elaborately in the Talmud:
Rabbi Hama bar Hanina taught, “what is the meaning of, ‘after the Lord your G-d shall you walk’ (Deuteronomy 13:5)? Is it possible for a human being to walk after the Divine Presence? After all has it not been said, ‘the Lord your G-d is a devouring flame’ (Deuteronomy 4: 24)? Instead you are to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be G-d. Just as G-d clothes the naked—as it is written, ‘the Lord G-d made Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them’ (Genesis 3:21); so you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One blessed be G-d visited the sick—as it is written, ‘the Lord G-d appeared to Abraham at the terebinths of Mamre’ [where according to the rabbis’ interpretation he was recuperating from his circumcision in the previous chapter] (Genesis 18:1); so you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One, blessed be G-d, comforted mourners—as it is written, ‘and it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that G-d blessed his son Isaac’ (Genesis 25:11); so you comfort the mourner. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be G-d buried the dead—as it is written, ‘And He buried him [Moses] in the valley of the land of Moab’ (Deuteronomy 34:6); so you bury the dead.

B. Talmud Sotah 14a

I could go on. And I could note as well the frequency with which the theme is articulated by medieval Jewish philosophers which will be exemplified here only by the instruction with which Maimonides concluded his Guide to the Perplexed:

The perfection in which man can truly glory is attained by him when he has acquired, as far as is possible for man, the knowledge of G-d.… Having acquired this knowledge he will be determined always to seek mercy, justice and righteousness, so as to imitate G-d…
Clearly it is a theme that runs through all Jewish religious thought. What strikes me as significant about this is that in every instance when the Torah or the rabbis, or Maimonides invoke *Imitatio Dei*, they invoke attributes of caring and concern. They do not focus on attributes, found in the Torah, of G-d as angry, jealous, or even destructive. More significantly, they direct us almost always not to ritual actions or spiritual qualities; but rather to ethical ones: how we treat our fellow human beings. Being G-d-like does not take us out of this world, but directs us to how we are to conduct ourselves in it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel gives profound expression to this idea. In *God in Search of Man*, he writes, “the Bible is primarily not man’s vision of God but God’s vision of man. The Bible is not man’s theology but God’s anthropiology, dealing with man and what He asks of him”⁴ All that said, the issue of imitation of G-d does not exhaust the complex issue of the mirroring of human beings and G-d. It also directs our attention to three cognate issues which time allows me to address only superficially. The first is analogy. In the Torah and also the rabbis, when G-d is described as king, it is, by analogy, instruction about how a king is to behave. When G-d is presented as judge, it, analogically prescribes what is expected of human judges. Similarly for G-d as lover or faithful spouse. These can be read both as theological metaphors and as ethical instruction. These analogical discussions about G-d are not precisely *Imitatio Dei* but they serve the same purpose.

Similarly correspondence. Correspondence is not imitation. Imitation is volitional. Correspondence is organic and thus, involuntary. The rabbis write about the correspondence of G-d and all Israel:

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Whoever rises up against Israel is as though they rose up against the Holy One,
Blessed be G-d Whoever helps Israel is as though they had helped the Holy One,
blessed be G-d (Mechilta to 15:7) Whoever hates Israel is as though they hated G-d
(Sifre to Numbers)

They teach that when Israel went into exile the Shechina—the indwelling presence of G-d—went into exile as well. This notion of correspondence underlies much of the mystical tradition. For Kabbalists, the Sefirotic system teaches that the physiognomy of humans corresponds directly to the architecture of the divine. And further that every action below has a corresponding action above. Thus is established a theurgic system in which we humans have influence over the divine. Most audaciously by our actions we can re-unite the shattered divine whole. This too is not *Imitatio Dei*. Yet it rests on a cognate premise.

And lastly I would very quickly raise the question of identity. What does one make of the strands of pantheism in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions? This seems like an amplification beyond imitation. From this perspective we humans do more than imitate G-d, we are very constituent elements of G-d. Does it render imitation inevitable, reciprocal,—or unnecessary? Perhaps we will have to let that wait for another evening.

What we can say with certainty is that Pat’s intuition was correct: imitation, *Imitatio Dei* and its cognates are very much fundamental categories of Jewish thought.
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