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Religious Identity and Renewal in the Twenty-first Century

Jewish, Christian and Muslim Explorations

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Religious Identity and Renewal in the Twenty-first Century: Christian and Muslim Explorations

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Preface

Martin Junge

Throughout history, religions have made significant contributions to transformation processes in society and provided a vision of life that has empowered people to work for change. Such a dynamic unfolds especially there where religious communities are open to renewal and transformation. As they are attentive to God's living presence, they see their own traditions in a new light. While some of these might need critical revision, others shine brighter than ever. It is crucial to learn how to relate one's own religious identity to the challenges and opportunities of one's time. This is a spiritual and a theological task that needs courage and commitment.

The sixteenth-century Reformation movement is a prominent case in point. Martin Luther and his contemporaries grappled with a tradition that had been handed down to them. Their struggle triggered the transformation of theological reflection, the reform of church structures and practices and the renewal of Christian life in general. The reformers firmly believed that listening to God's call "for today" was vital for discerning the way forward.

Such openness to God's living presence and the eagerness theologically to discern the signs of the times can be found in many religious communities. This publication provides insightful reflections and analyses by Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars on religious renewal across the three monotheistic religious traditions. Renewal processes are subject to in-depth theological debates on how religions understand their own resources and criteria for renewal.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has begun its journey toward the Reformation anniversary, which will culminate in the 500th anniversary of the dawn of the Protestant Reformation in October 2017. All LWF events and processes are carried out in accordance with three basic principles:

1. A strong emphasis on the polycentric character of the Reformation and the various contextual realities that gave rise to the Reformation

2. Close attention to the issues that move people and societies today, since the Reformation was not merely a moment in history, but is integral to the church's identity (*ecclesia semper reformanda*), and as such challenges the church to be open for renewal today

3. Commemoration and celebration of the Reformation anniversary in a way that affirms and strengthens ecumenical relations.

At a time when the world is becoming ever more religiously diverse, questions of reformation and renewal do not only occupy Christian circles alone. While other religious communities come from unique historical trajectories and theological premises, similar issues in relation to tradition and renewal have emerged. An interreligious conversation about the polycentric nature of religious communities and their negotiation processes regarding the boundaries of internal and external diversity helps us more profoundly to comprehend the complexity of the processes involved.

The essays in this collection were first presented at the August 2014 international interreligious conference, "Religious Identity and Renewal: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Explorations," co-organized with and co-sponsored by the LWF and the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University. I commend this collection of essays to all those who seek to deepen their understanding of resources for renewal in their own and in other religious communities in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Michael Reid Trice and Simone Sinn

Religious identity is being profoundly challenged in our current age. Wherever religious life becomes a matter of debate today, the focus of attention quickly shifts to zones of conflict. Violence, hostility and hatred in the name of God or the sacred captures our attention. It is a mean trait of our age that hate is so closely aligned with religious identity. Examples differ by degree, even as a pattern is strikingly homogenous: religion is used to stigmatize and even obliterate the constitutive aspects of a shared humanity.

When one asks the question, What is the meaning and purpose of religion in human life? conversations around themes of nested identity (national, ethno-religious etc.) and cross-societal representation or manipulation of divine or sacred intention for humanity begin. Global dynamics and local aspirations seem to manufacture retribalized ethno-religious identities or create deep instability and socio-economic divisions. We witness a rise in the construction of physical or psycho-social borders that reclassify our humanity and transmogrify human beings into refugees of suspicious intent.

How can religious belonging make a difference and transcend the current protectionist trend for fear-based isolation? How is one expected to live a message of freedom amidst the restrictions of justice and deep moral trespass? Finally, how do we credibly account for the sacred that cares for humanity amidst the maelstrom of human ugliness?

In fact, religious people from every quarter of the globe, individually and collectively, counter militant religious expressions in creative ways across numerous platforms (social media, policy discussion, socio-religious affinity coalitions, etc.). These responses both resist the rhetorical or physical weaponization of religion, and represent the deep messages of human flourishing, societal health, global well-being and the need for soulful reflection on the spiritual virtues and messages toward the collective greater good of our unfolding future.

Even and especially amidst the maelstrom of human ugliness, human beings in the billions prove to be resilient in resisting untoward violence in their communities, standing against the radicalization of their faith, actively engaging their best spiritual selves in religious communities and hoping for a future society that refuses to accommodate itself to yesterday's animosities with its dead allegiances.

In the midst of these dynamics it has become evident that the question how faith communities deal with renewal in relation to their religious identity is vital—not only for their own self-understanding, but also for how they participate with others in society.

In anticipation of the 500th Reformation anniversary in 2017, Christians engage in lively debates on the meaning of Reformation, not just affirming its historical significance, but asking what kind of insights are relevant and helpful in constructively contributing to societal change today. Furthermore, it is pivotal for them to enter into conversation with experiences of renewal in other religious traditions. Sharing "memories of renewal" from different faith perspectives and analyzing the interrelationship between religious and social renewal helps to strengthen interreligious relations. In face of contemporary challenges and opportunities, it is necessary jointly to develop "visions of renewal" from the Holy Scriptures, faith traditions and theology. This includes identifying "places of renewal" in today's contexts, especially highlighting the role of local interfaith initiatives as well as interreligious cooperation in humanitarian, development and academic work.

In recognition of the challenges to religious identity and its renewal in the twenty-first century, a consultation of religious practitioners and scholars took place in August 2014 in Seattle, Washington (USA) under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry. Over forty Jews, Christians and Muslims participated in a five-day consultation, convened to address the key, pervasive questions facing peoples around the world, and to provide multivalent religious responses to these questions. The responses to these central questions were agreed upon by attendees and planners as tantamount to sustaining a constructive religious impulse in society. The method used throughout the consultation was one of participatory engagement around themes that arose from the key questions. Presenters addressed the questions from their particular religious perspectives, and shared themes and concerns rather organically and naturally emerged. The essays in this volume were initially presented at the consultation in Seattle.

The reader is invited to walk through the five complete sections in the following pages. This introduction will further outline each section and identify some of the main supporting questions and themes respective of each section.

The first section, God, Generosity and Theodicy, responds to the key question, *What is the radical question for religions tomorrow?* Responses included the evolution of religions in the world, whether humanity is entering a post-religious epoch and how to make theological sense of massive suffering. Michael Reid Trice argues for a total reassessment of generosity as a theological and cross-religious focus that the world desperately requires today. Like an under-metabolized nutrient, generosity is something akin to deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) as a self-replicating material present in all living organisms. The Muslim understanding of *Zakat*, as well as the Jewish interpretation of *Tzedakah*, attests to this nutrient, i.e., an ontological status of generosity rooted in the human being prior to human doing. Trice concludes that any future for the credibility of religion will require a comparative religious reclamation of scriptural generosity that confronts growing disregard and violence in the world. For his part, Anson Laytner responds to this section's key question by noting the deal breaker for many in the world, or what theologians call the challenge of theodicy, Why would a loving God let us suffer? In considering the Holocaust, Laytner states early on that either God is responsible for genocide or God is not responsible and has no power to do otherwise. Part of the crisis of our moment includes our distance from the divine. That is, when the Torah was written, the people knew where God dwelt; today, the post-modern crisis of meaning contributes to the human feeling of displacement altogether. We must not delude ourselves with theologies that rationalize human suffering in the world on the canvas of divine wisdom. Such responses do more harm than good, and discredit serious theological engagement. Laytner discovers a response to displacement in a model of enlightenment through the Xai Fung Jewish community in China, and asks the reader to consider another route to human well-being.

The second section, Religious Voice, Dialogue and Renewal, offers responses to the key question, *Who determines when the religious voice is truthful or diabolical?* An emerging theme of the conference was whether and how religions share a collective responsibility to identify when ideology is morally reprehensible. John Borelli's essay is aimed at the challenges of religious identity in the twenty-first century. First, religious dialogue is never meant to be the exclusive domain of experts; instead, dialogue belongs to our whole humanity, from local to global contexts. In a pluralistic world, dialogue requires a particular humility but never amelioration of the tradition or religious roots that shape one's worldview. Drawing on examples from Vatican II, and in particular *Nostra Aetate*, and with a view to religious pluralism, Borelli identifies three false starts for the practice of dialogue in communitarian contexts, one of these being the misconception that dialogue is a fully human undertaking. Whenever we dialogue, Jews, Muslims and Christians—and naturally

additional religious streams beyond the confines of a consultation—are in the midst of the sacred or divine mystery, reminding us to listen to the stories of others and trust that our own story will speak first and best in a kind of holy attentiveness. Next, Shira Lander begins her essay by noting that renewal of religious identity in the future will not take place unless we have dealt with the substantial challenges of our past. These challenges include universalistic triumphalism, which is a cross-religious ideological methodology that advanced proselytization and forced conversion of other human beings. Contrariwise, religion in the public arena of the twenty-first century will necessarily need to include atheists, spiritual and secular humanists and others. If there exists a cross-religious "evangelistic" aim today, it is for religions to express their core values in unison and likewise to confront those who use the elements of faith in ways that cause and perpetuate substantial harm. And yet, the difficulty with dialogue is that it always transpires between the willing. What about the inclusion of extremist positions, which quickly demote dialogue into a debate on difference? Several challenges remain, one of which Lander signals for immediate concern: What are the limits of religious tolerance? There is a vast asymmetry between religious pluralists and extremist positions. And yet we will all inherit the present and gift the future, so the challenge we will be responding to in the decades to come is centered on how we will disrupt the cycles of hostility.

The third section, Memory, Tradition and Revelation, considered the question, *What makes a text sacred, and who has the authority to interpret it?* David Sandmel starts the discussion by exploring key concepts of Scripture and revelation understood in the classic rabbinic period. A text is never just a text; the Torah is never understood as narrow law, but by extension includes the *Tanach* and the entirety of rabbinic literature. This suggests that one is participating in Torah in the community's daily activity of transmission and interpretation of the text. After the fall of the Second Temple the rabbi can be understood as the avatar of Torah, or master teacher. In this way, Torah reflection includes the life of the community with its leadership, aiming to interpret anew where God is leading the people. In this way, Torah is the embodiment of God within the community; it is in one sense the incarnation of God's Word within the community. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the religious text is in both written and oral form, insofar as the former is meant to be spoken aloud and lived in community. Still, who determines when a text is just a text, or conversely when a text is an inspired act of divine revelation? Or, more to the point, what are the marks of a revealed text that make it sacred and not merely profane? The crisis of the authority of the text, and the authority to identify revelatory import within a text, creates problems for our age that will underscore ambiguity in sacred texts, begging the question regarding the rightful

interpreter. The veracity of the lived text is evident in the life of the communities around the world who rely on these Scriptures. The communities who will identify the authentic use of Scripture when utilized for diabolical ends must correct aberrational interpretations.

Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan assesses the normative role of memory of the religious tradition, which is essential to the future of community identity. Following an analysis of two forms of memory—these being the event and the emotions attributed to the event—Pakpahan discusses the connection between ritual and memory, whereby the ruptured community re-members and re-actualizes its past in the present. How helpful is this practice of ritual to the future of religious well-being? What do we do with the memory of hostility or the so-called dangerous memory? The dangerous memory is in fact a form of forgetfulness, whereby a community develops a historical amnesia regarding the pain it caused other human beings and communities. Re-membering prohibits simply pardoning our humanity for the activity of former ills; rather, we remain in history and bear responsibility and accountability for the past. Finally, Nelly van Doorn-Harder assesses the tradition of the early Christian experience, which received the entire Bible as one continuous moment of incarnation, whereby Scriptures were aimed at initiation into the sacred practices of the believing community. Revelation is evident through the "insights of the heart," which opens Scripture to proper interpretation. In early Christian culture, the machinations of memory were central insofar as the transmission of faith (of hearing and recalling) was necessary for the formation of tomorrow's communitarian identity. What makes a text sacred? The answer depends on how that text is treated in community throughout history, to this very day. For Doorn-Harder, the text is reconfigured as sacred by the continuous efforts of those adhering to the Scripture, as a community that dedicates its vocational impulse to interpreting, transmitting and preserving these texts.

The fourth section, Twenty-First Century Formation of Community, asks, *What are the concrete realities that predominantly shape religious life today?* Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos responds to this question through the lens of a first-generation Filipina leader in the Pacific Northwest of the USA, where no dominant religious group persists; in the context of the US Pacific Northwest, religious identity is highly elastic. Thus, a predominantly non-monolithic interpretation of religious identity will necessarily include features of gender, ethnicity, culture and geography, among others. Punsalan-Manlimos identifies the cross-religious challenge of teaching children how to thrive in a pluralistic culture while remaining connected to the tradition and community that shaped them; the author draws on the narrative of second- and third-generation immigrant communities, where the diminishment of ethno-religious identity can become a crisis for families and larger communities

alike. Indeed, how one forms roots amidst rootlessness is a key challenge in the formation and resiliency of any religious community. How less true is this of other geographical regions in the world today? Second, Paul Strasko, reflects on his experience as a rabbi in Germany. In a congregation of 2,700 members, including many Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, he recalls the challenge of bringing even ten people together for worship. Three generations of Stalinism eradicated a community's self-evident sense of Shabbat-Shalom (of welcoming and greeting one another in the vitality of community life), as the soul of the community on which to build any future. In terms of formation, Strasko notes that the future of religious leadership in local to global contexts must relieve itself of particular delusions, ranging from a static understanding of any core, religious sense of community, to the delusion that religious institutions will self-evidently inform or shape the future. Indeed, the last century alone teaches us how it takes very little more than a stretch of religiously disconnected time to undo the moorings for the future on which that religious foundation is grounded.

Herbert Moyo's essay in this section covers the question of authentic religion, beginning first from his broader context as an African Christian. Moyo reflects on how religion must have authentic voice, leading to the love of God and neighbor. And yet, challenges include how religion responds to the political contexts embroiling contemporary life. For instance, even as religion must address governmental abuses, whenever there are differences of perspective—such as between mainline churches and African independent churches—society can become confused by the question of who authenticates the religious voice at these moments. At these times, what criteria do we use to determine if a particular ecclesial perspective represents religious authentic narrative? In the African-Christian context—where multiple forms of Christianity are thriving—there is a lack of agreement between traditional mainline and African initiated churches that bring a focus on healing ministry. In the case of healing ministry where adherents stop taking medications and get sick, new consensus must be quickly reached on the normative, scriptural interpretations that speak to human wellness. The formation of the religious community in the twenty-first century will require more levels of consensus in local contexts around the globe.

The fifth section, Intersection of Identities, is framed with this key, prevailing question in mind, *What is God's vision for the world, and how must humanity respond to this vision?* Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio begins with the mystery central to Muslim theology: that being created through the will of God suggests that humans are an outpouring of God's desire to be known. Scripture attests to God as both disappointed and genuinely interested in how we care for one another, for the world, for the integrity of our relationships, laws and systems of governance. The twenty-first-century *Umma* (community), like most com-

munities around the world, is polycentric, with contextual theologies that are manifold and never reducible to one theological locus. The polycentric *Umma* in Muslim life requires an honest exploration of what it means to be one nation (people), and how people of faith operate with religious identity in a secular space, where even within families (in particular where both parents share different religious identities) there may be no single coherent religious narrative.

The final contribution of our text, and within this section, comes from Suneel Bhanu Busi. Busi also begins with a discussion on anthropology and explains how the Hindu creation story, and the enculturation of the caste system into Indian life, configures a repressive lens; through a complicated history, the moniker "Children of God" (*Harijan*) is today considered a derogatory reference for Dalits as illegitimate children in society. Busi discusses oppression in the form of ritual degradation and socio-economic political deprivation for Dalits, and then lands on the challenge of multiple belonging. Every individual carries multiple belonging.

The consultation was more than the component parts of these sections. It offered a template for thorough discussion by practitioners and scholars, with a view to our humanity prior to our expertise. The consultation participants consistently identified, from their own contexts, direct correlations between environmental degradation, global rates of poverty increase, the abuse of women and children, and phenomenal levels of displacement not experienced on our planet since the end of World War II. In a joint communiqué they affirmed:

> Communities are seeking renewal in many different ways. These include: reinterpreting difficult texts, the healing of memories and overcoming past divisions. Understanding more fully the historicity of the texts and of the divisions helps us to think anew about the constructive meaning of the texts in today's world. Each of our religious communities draws on rich interpretative expertise (midrash, tafsir, linguistic analysis, hermeneutics), and in reflecting on the interpretative challenges together we mutually benefit from this expertise.
>
> Theological education can be an important space where religious scholars discern the meaning of the Holy Scriptures and the traditions in ways that are true to the living relationship with the Creator. Jewish, Christian and Muslim identities are interrelated and their theologies have a rich history of responsiveness to one another. Today we see people of different generations in all of our faith communities asking radical questions about God in the face of tremendous human suffering. We realize that we cannot consider the future of our own faith community in isolation from others; our communities are closely related and the future of life in dignity is a shared concern.[1]

[1] **www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Statement_ReligiousIdentity%2BRenewal_SeattleAug2014.pdf**

Finally, the Japanese garden in the neighborhood of Seattle University is both a physical place and a metaphor, where integration of living ecosystems, in substance and aesthetics, are meant to stir both heart and mind. Religions attest to the human proximity to mystery, and the divine's desire for us to experience beauty, given first in the natural world, as a frame for our being on the planet. Part of a Japanese garden's beauty is located in the Japanese worldview (*wabi sabi*) that allows for both transience and imperfection, alongside order. Shy of choosing tomorrow's emerging systematic ideologies, religion reminds us that life is hemmed in by both limits and imperfection. Like a Japanese garden, how do we account for imperfection as a virtue, and not as a hindrance to our humanity? Should the moss sometimes win? The Japanese garden was purposely made to appear wild, to have unexplored and unplanned corners, to be spontaneous and not predetermined at every crevice and corner. It is arranged on purpose to be manicured in a way that never surrenders to the wilderness.

How will religions have a role in cultivating the human future on this planet? Renewal of religious identity in the twenty-first century will require new metaphors alongside authentic reclamations of our multiple identities, in order to interpret where mystery is spontaneously emerging tomorrow.

In the twenty-first century, diverse religious identities intersect every day. The classical borders for religious identity are both more porous and more vulnerable. In the face of this fluidity, the formation of religious identity requires a cross-religious aim, which we see today in the religious reclamation of early mysticism within the respective traditions. The aim is to go to the roots and to the depths of faith in community and the faith instinct generally, in whatever socio-and cultural-religious contexts we find ourselves. In a return to reshaping religious cosmologies that account for our full humanity, all human beings must ask how their respective religious identities enrich or skew a vision of our shared humanity on this planet, and explore the possible horizons of a shared witness to inhabiting the world today.

I. God, Generosity and Theodicy

The Future of Religious Identity: A Spirit of Generosity

Michael Reid Trice

Introduction

What is the radical question for religions today and tomorrow? We start to locate this "radical question" by first assessing what the world needs from religion, assuming that religion is meant to participate in the healing of the world. So, we begin our inquiry with a quick sense of our socio-historical location in recent years. What is happening in the world? In a sampling of current world events we witness: religion or its aliases utilized to justify actions that include kidnappings of Church of the Brethren teenage girls in Nigeria; the murder of Israeli and Palestinian children in a blood revenge and the further escalation to inter-ethnic and inter-national conflict; the rapid rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); a twenty-first-century refugee crisis for millions; the continued fight for rights by minority religious groups such as Ahmadiyah Muslims and Batak Protestant Christians in Indonesia; and the persistence of "Bible-based" white xenophobic Christianity in quarters of the USA. This brief socio-historical location is part of our current global context where the principles of our faiths are used as cyphers for sowing or reinforcing conflict. That our hallowed virtues and values have become cyphers of this order is an abysmal fact of the coercion of religion. Of course, the news is not all bad: Mennonites and Lutherans participate in a ministry of reconciliation around the world as a means of overcoming the violence of their past; Muslims and Christians from Indonesia to Dearborn, Michigan, endeavor together alongside other co-religionists to combat anti-Islamic bias in the West and abroad; and

practitioners and activists from all three Abrahamic faiths have more access to one another than at any time in modern history. Still, the serious challenge we face as co-religionists is that the bad news is so horrendously bad, even anathema, to the spirit of religion itself.

In a search for the "radical question" of religion today and tomorrow, we continue by asking specifically whether, in the tribulations of the world, there appears to be a deep need or hunger for a necessary yet under-metabolized nutrient that religion brings to the world. This would also have to be a nutrient that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have it within their power to provide to the world, both fully and unequivocally. Wherever we locate this hunger and lack of nutrient, we finally also locate the radical question for religion today and tomorrow, as this will be the greatest unmet need to which religion must respond. First, do we see a pattern of hunger and, if so, then what nutrient is missing? We see a pattern of hunger: alongside the examples described above, we see people on this planet plagued by a life with little or no hope due to consequences that range from the highest number of immigrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) since the end of World War II, to ecologically-based droughts or flooding in some of the most vulnerable local communities in the world.[1] Swaths of our fellow human beings are embroiled in inter-ethnic and intra-religious conflict, which increases the ambiguity and confusion for all adherents of religion itself; and, finally, a growing set of armed conflicts, or potential hot-spots for armed conflicts, proliferate across the planet, ranging from the Ukraine to the Middle East and North Africa, and beyond.

We might too quickly rush for an antidote to the stories of humanity in conflict by believing that the missing nutrient in the world is peace. We simply need more peace, we might say. If so, then our radical question for our age is, How will religion and its adherents become relevant instruments of peace in the twenty-first century? This question of religious relevance for peace is certainly essential for us. And yet, in the paragraphs below I contend that there is a more immediate nutrient for us that we undervalue, and that we can nevertheless together locate in our faiths as a "spirit of generosity." Within each of the monotheistic religions—Jewish, Christian,

[1] At the end of 2013, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released its annual statistics showing that more than fifty-one million people were forcibly displaced at the end of that year, marking the largest number since the close of the Second World War. By 2015 this number had risen to 60 million; half of the world's refugees in 2013 are children. The report notes: "If displaced people had their own country it would be the 24th most populous in the world." At **www.refworld.org/publisher,UNHCR,ANNUALREPORT,,53a3df694,0.html**

Muslim—there is an *a priori* spirit of generosity that is necessarily equally prior to, and instructive of, any religious commitment to peace, and that is absolutely essential for the world today. In fact, any viable commitment to peace withers when it does not originate in generosity. Generosity is that nutrient.

Here is the question I propose to ask as the radical question for religion today and tomorrow, What is the spirit of generosity that Jews, Muslims and Christians share from the heart of their communities, which is critical to humanity and the world in the twenty-first century? Given my assertions on behalf of generosity, this essay will proceed as follows: (1) it will briefly present a working definition of generosity; (2) it will assess how a spirit of generosity is meant to be an underlying disposition for human beings. This disposition will be assessed through the narrative of creation, within Scripture and in relation to classical thought; (3) in order to locate the source and font of cooperation between Jews, Muslims and Christians, the essay will explore the connection between generosity and holy envy; (4) it will then identify current historical statistics on the co-opting of religion by violence in the world, where both holiness and generosity fail; and, finally, (5) it will conclude with a practical application of generosity to the radical question of our day.

Generosity—a working definition

From a cultural point of view, generosity will elicit unique or distinctive features. In some cultures, any act of giving must be reciprocated, whereby accepting generosity is a commitment to relationship. In other cultures, the generous person or community is altruistic or empathetic, whereby the gift of giving is spoiled when accompanied by the expectation of a reciprocated gain to the giver. I suggest that we refer to generosity not first in terms of what human beings do, but rather in terms of who God is. In sacred Scripture, God's character is predominately generous and merciful, steadfast and loving. I mean generosity elicited in the Hebrew term, *hesed*, insofar as by *hesed* we mean generosity as an enduring loving kindness that originates first in God's character, as a God who desires to be in relationship with creation.[2] God is the most "merciful and compassionate," from which the world is derived, as is affirmed in the opening surah of the Qur'an. Christians too resonate with the theme of God's overflowing grace given as a gift to the world. Particular understandings on divine generos-

[2] God is "rich in *hesed* and fidelity" (Ex 34:6). In this context fidelity infers steadfastness, without which loving kindness would be frivolous in nature.