

Bad Religion
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Many years ago, when I first announced to my family and friends my intentions of getting into this Jewish business, I was confronted with this question:

“Why in the world would you want to do that? Don’t you know that religion is the source of most of the world’s problems?”

Well, I took great offense to that statement. “That is simply not true,” I protested.

“Okay,” came back the challenge, “How about this conflict ..., and what about that war?” And the list grew and grew.

I found myself becoming very defensive. “Yeah, well, what about ... Oh, never mind. How about ... okay, not that one either.” True enough, while there are some obvious exceptions; the reality is that a great deal of human conflict has, at its core, some grounding in religion. At least that is often the claim of those promoting such conflicts. Finally, in the end, I just blurted out, “Well, that’s not what religion is really all about.” I still believe that.

So much of what we see, what sets our perceptions and attitudes about religion, is defined by extremist religious positions and fundamentalist claims. As we watch the news, read the paper, even try to avoid answering those young people, bibles in hand, knocking on the front door, it is easy to understand why many simply say, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” Hey, if this is the definition of organized religion, then count me among the non-believers as well.

Actually, I have less of a problem with those devout and enthusiastic followers who show up at my front door. I even have some admiration for their enthusiasm. In response, I have found my own enthusiasm to be key. My aunt taught me this. When one of these proselytizers would show up at her door to share the ‘good news,’ she would invite them in. Yes, invite them in. With all the enthusiasm she could muster, she would declare her willingness to listen to their good news if they would first allow her to share the good news about her God! For some reason this would send them scurrying on to the next door.

What I do have a problem with is the subtext to this visit, which is, “You know, the God *you* believe in isn’t really God.” I call this “Kennel Ration” theology. Some of you will remember the commercial that began with ‘my dog is better than your dog.’ In this case just reverse the letters, ‘my God is better than your God.’ All kidding aside, it is offensive enough for someone to tell me their dog is better than mine. But when someone starts professing theological superiority? Well that is what turns so many of us away. Let’s be clear, such belief is simply not

monotheism but a kind of paganism where the gods are placed in opposition to each other. There is no doubt that, in the name of this kind of religious thinking, we have inflicted some, forgive me, God awful horrors on each other.

I am concerned that we tend to look at that which has been justified in the name of religion and assume that religion is therefore the source of this evil ... as if, were religion to be eliminated tomorrow, individuals bent on tyranny, oppression and domination would not find some other hook on which to hang us all. Religion has too often been used as the handy tool by which to control the general population; used by those seeking power as a way to justify human oppression. This is the rather foul paganism that we saw this summer exposed for all its ugliness in southern Lebanon where many of the local residents, and especially the children, became means to a political end, rather than the embodiments of the sacred that they are. Want to know in one simple answer why the images from the two sides of the war this summer were so different? God. Israelis, who see in every human life a reflection of the Divine, refuse to allow the profaning of that image in the name of theatrical manipulation. Israeli victims do not become political ploys on the world stage. Here you have it: religion, placed in hands of those seeking to forward their own mortal interests, bind God to profane political pursuits. Earthly goals are thereby elevated by their connection to heaven. The building of a nuclear arsenal, just as a for instance, is justified not for what it is: as a way to foster selfish, maniacal interests in power and control, but rather, in an incredible perversion of religion, as a way to further God's goals for humanity.

All of this might be laughable if both our historic and contemporary experiences weren't so tragic. Every day we open our newspapers and find the names of those raising the religious banner to justify the oppression of their own people and attacks upon other faiths and nations. True enough, these days those names are most likely Nasrallah, bin Laden and Ahmadinejad. But let's be honest, while this kind of religious extremism seems the sole property of Islam these days, we know that this has not always been the case. Remember Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir? Baruch Goldstein felt that God had told him, *and that Judaism justified*, the killing of Muslim worshippers whose presence was desecrating the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Yigal Amir, of course, felt that God's word *as he understood it from Jewish teachings* justified his murder of Yitzhak Rabin who had, after all, desecrated God's word by trying to make peace with Israel's Arab neighbors and considering the return of God given sacred land. While these two might have acted alone, there is no denying that their violent acts can be attributed to the twisted Judaic teaching of their religious leaders. And it is not that far a walk from here to the discussion I shared with you at this time last year, of my acquaintance, who, while expressing her respect for the Muslim people, stated unequivocally that the Quran was simply wrong; so too the Hindu Sruti, the Buddhist Tripitaka and even the Hebrew Bible. Well, the Hebrew bible gets a bit of a break ... it isn't wrong, just incomplete. But, you get the picture.

The point is that there is an entire dangerous spectrum of bad religion, ranging from misguided, fanatical individuals who see themselves as the tools of God to power hungry political leaders, consciously conspiring, manipulating and misusing God's name in order to forward their own political agendas, dragging religion down to justify the worst kind of human behavior as religiously sanctioned acts. Transcendent fundamental truths, what our nation's founders identified as inalienable rights, are sullied with self serving human goals and desires and then the whole shebang is attributed to God. This misuse and misdirection of religion for the purpose of achieving human rather than Godly goals is bad religion. Unfortunately, this rather virulent strain of infected religion has been almost impossible to kill over the centuries.

So, why have I not yet joined the, "I don't believe in organized religion" chorus? Wouldn't we just be better off without it? No, I don't think so. To paraphrase, Anne Frank, of blessed memory, in spite of all I know about religion, I still believe. Irregardless of the fact that religion has been foisted upon us to justify man's mistreatment of humankind (and I use the gendered reference on purpose), I still believe. Okay, so send me to the south pacific and call me a cockeyed optimist, but I believe religion, *true* religion, is meant to heal rather than fracture. So, I hitch my wagon to a long line of religious thinkers who have used this litmus test: Any way of thinking about God or using religion as a tool to divide, rather than unite is simply bad religion.

I look at the beginning of Genesis, a Torah portion that we will read next week, and I find there what I understand as *the* fundamental religious truth, that we are created *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God. We are, each of us, embodiments of the sacred. It is incumbent on each of us, therefore, to be partners with God in bringing healing to our world.

Our Torah teaches that God created 'man and woman' in the Divine image; not Abraham and Sarah, not Mary and Paul, or Ali and Khadeeja, but man and woman. *All three faiths* proclaim the creation of a single common ancestor, one not yet Jewish, or Christian or Muslim ... but generic, not yet defined, simply created in the image of God. True monotheism is the worship of this one God – who is God to all, *and in whose image we are all created*. In such a belief there is room for all, room for many paths, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim paths, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox paths, Catholic and Protestant, Sunni and Shia, all paths that ultimately lead to the same place, to connection with the same Divine source giving meaning and purpose to *all* of our lives, together.

Religion's sole purpose is to engage us in that sacred partnership by connecting us to something transcendent, something that elevates us. The particular of our rituals, ceremonies and liturgy are meant to assist us in transcending our human frailties and limitations that we might touch that Ground of Being, if you will, which gives our life its ultimate meaning and purpose. Call it, Adonai, Allah, Buddha or Bob; each is an attempt to define that which is limitless, to

comprehend the incomprehensible, and to grasp with our human hands that which is infinite. There is *nothing* inherently wrong with any one path that leads to this place. What *is* inherently wrong is declaring *my* path wrong because it is not *your* particular path. That is bad religion. And there is *nothing* inherent in this sacred pursuit that demands the sacrifice of human life. That is exactly what we are to understand from the story of the binding of Isaac. This message about the sanctity of human life, by the way, is not just our message, but Christianity's and yes, believe it or not, Islam's as well. It is time that humanity finally learned that lesson.

On this most sacred day of our year we are called upon to re-sanctify life. In our fasting, our prayers and our scriptural readings the theme is the same: Choosing life, enhancing life, sanctifying our lives and the lives of others through our actions. Look at just some of what we say and do and hear in the course of this day: We say *al cheyt* asking forgiveness for those offenses in which we have put our own needs and goals before those of God. We pray *shema koleynu* 'hear our voice' that our pleas may reach the depths of our own being, heard by the Divine source within each of us, motivating us to lift ourselves up towards the sacredness that is the source of our life. We say *Avinu malkeynu*, inscribe us in the book of life. And we recognize that the Godly source in each of our souls can be renewed through *teshuvah*, repentance, revived through *tefilah*, prayer, and reenergized through *tzedakah*, acts of justice which bring freedom and possibility to every soul.

We are asked to commit ourselves this day to the sacred teachings about life found in our Torah and Prophets. We are taught by Jonah that we do not bring God into this world by twisting our own human need for vengeance and calling it Divine retribution. God's purpose, we are reminded along with Jonah, is to offer compassion and care for those who do not even know 'their right hand from their left.' Isaiah urges us to remember that our fasting and prayers are useless if their end continues to be the "strife and discord" of bad religion. Our acts on this day are worthless if they do not compel us "to unlock the shackles of injustice ... to let the oppressed go free ... to share bread with the hungry ... and to clothe the naked." In other words, to live each moment of each day by those words we find at the very center of the Torah, words we read this day as well: *v'ahavta l'reyacha kamocho*, "love your neighbor as yourself." This, as the great Rabbi Hillel taught, is the very heart of Judaism and, I would argue, must be at the heart of all true religion. The words we read this morning provide comfort and encouragement as we face this seemingly daunting task: "... this ... which I command you this day is not too hard for you ... No, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, *and you can do it.*"

Not only can we do it, but I believe we *must* do it. If we have any hope of moving our world closer to the peace and wholeness. We must first reconnect with that which is fundamental to our human being: that we are *each* created in the likeness of God. We must transcend egocentrism and reconnect with the source

of life. And we must search out, nurture and embolden the voices, spirit and determination of those of every race, nation and faith who also understand the sanctification of life to be the ultimate goal of all religion.

Such voices do indeed exist. Within the Muslim community there are the voices of individuals such as Irshad Manji and organizations such as the Free Muslims Coalition Calling for *ijtihad*, the application of common sense and human reason to the interpretation of the Islamic law. In Israel there are the voices of Neve Shalom – Wahat al-Salam a community of 50 families, half Palestinian and half Jewish demonstrating every day that Jews and Palestinians *can* live together. There is time to mention only these few here. But I hope, over the coming year to bring to our attention Many more such voices. We must search them out, join together, find our voice and become fundamentalists. We must be fundamentalist in our pursuit and advocacy of that which is truly the transcendent: the inalienable rights of every human soul to, yes, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We must become religious fanatics. Let us be fanatical about the protection and preservation of all life. Let us become the proselytizers, Knocking on doors and asking for all to join us, Not under the banner of *our* God but under the banner of the One God. That, my friends, would be *great* religion and no task in our sorely fractured world is more needed or could be more sacred than this.

L'Chayim!