



# Contemporary Ethical and Religious Challenges to Religion

01.10.2014 | Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn\*

**The subject of the contemporary ethical and religious challenges to religion haunts me, throwing me into countless days of reflection and causes me many sleepless nights. There is no question that religion is on the defensive in all places where modern values have crept in—values like pluralism, scientific skepticism, this-worldliness, autonomy and individualism. In the contemporary cultures of Europe and America, religion is often seen as incompatible with these pervasive values. As a result, religious institutions seem to be losing the battle culturally in nearly all communities whose members refuse to isolate themselves by retreating to self-imposed ghettos.**

This is an essential difference between our predicament and those of our ancestors, particularly those of antiquity, the Middle Ages and early modernity — the eras of the spiritual luminaries that many of us look to for inspiration and enlightenment. These authorities lived in cultures that were organized around religion and theological values. In these cultures, one could assume that unless a person took the radical step of becoming a heretic, that person's *weltanschauung* and daily life was suffused with religious practice and commitment to the synagogue or the Church.

But today, the opposite is the case. Modern life is all about personal choice and consequently fidelity to religious community, belief and tradition cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the Greek "*haireisthai*" meaning "to choose" supplies the root for our English term, "heresy." All of us moderns live a life of radical choosing—to choose in or choose out of our faiths. The challenges to cultural, moral, and political challenges to religion are ubiquitous, compelling and powerful, and unless we recognize them squarely and take active steps to meet them, our communities will continue dwindle and our faiths will be imperiled.

I would like to briefly touch on three critical challenges to both Judaism and Christianity today, in the hope of stimulating among us further reflection, discussion and action. Each one of us here, whether Catholic or Jewish, experiences these challenges. More pointedly, Christians, Jews and our faiths are often explicit targets of these threats. The first challenge is broad secularism—and its ethical implications in particular. The second is religious irrationality expressed as extremism, intolerance and violence, with all of its horrific human and political consequences. Both these challenges stem from the extremes—from the "left" and the "right" politically. They naturally attack long standing Jewish and Christian traditions, whose laws and intellectual foundations bear the stamp of reasonableness, wisdom and moderation.

These initial two threats are external. The third challenge is internal. It is the public moral failings of so many of our religious leaders and institutions, and the devastating communal effects these failings leave in their wake. I hasten to add that my thoughts about this third challenge arise primarily from my reflections on the failings in my own community, the Jewish community. I have no wish to judge other communities or their leaders in this area. However, because we live in a global village, I suspect that the challenges to the Church are not entirely different from those effecting Judaism and its institutions.

## I. Secularism and its Ethics

Modern science has enabled us to create a world where we have a good deal of control of our environment, allowing us to live better, more humane lives. Modern medicine, electricity, computers, micro-technology, communication and the efficient distribution of goods and services enable humanity to flourish with greater dignity than did our ancestors—and this flourishing should be understood as a blessing in a deeply religious and theological sense.

Yet science naturally fosters a philosophy of “scientism”—the functional, empirical and materialistic understanding of the universe. Science’s domain is restricted to measurable phenomena in space and time. It has no concern with transcendental, metaphysical or spiritual entities. Its mode of thinking is skeptical, positivistic and ultimately, utilitarian. Thus the worldview of scientism often leads to an understanding of human experience that is inimical to simple faith and the spiritual yearning to connect to the Eternal One Who exists beyond space and time. Indeed, God is a stranger in this world of materialistic quantitative and causal dynamics, and our culture as a whole has become steadily more disengaged from organized faith.

Inevitably, we in modern times have become estranged from the Divine. According to recent surveys, the fastest growing religious group in America today are “nones”—people who have no religion. 20-22% of all Americans claim they have no religion. The estimate is that 1/3 of native American born Catholics have left the Church, mostly for no other religious institution. If we look at the younger population—the millennials who were born after 1980, the percentage rises to 32% for both Jews and Christians. Although laicite is official legal policy in France only, it is a wide cultural and social reality throughout Western and increasingly Eastern Europe. 30% of all French have no religious affiliation, while 43% of people in England consider religion to have little to no importance in their lives. In Mediterranean Catholic countries like Spain and Italy, the number of “nominals”—that is, those who identify as Catholics but are far from religious practice—is growing exponentially. All this means that both the Church and synagogue are rapidly losing people in dramatic numbers.

The deepest challenge to religion of this scientific secularism, is not the quest for control of nature—which is a good thing—nor the seemingly irresistible and unlimited quest for wealth—which is no virtue. It is, rather, the implications for a religious understanding of human life and ethics. Any functional understanding of human life divests the human person of what is most precious in religious terms, namely the transcendent human quality of Tselem Elokim, Imago Dei, the Divine Image. This biblical teaching—that each person is created in God’s Holy Image—is axiomatic to both Judaism and the Church. It is the fount of transcendent human value and the foundation of our religious ethics. Without Tselem, the human creature becomes just another biological species—and hence a phenomenon to be observed, quantified, evaluated and dispensed with, when he or she loses her functional effectiveness, whether that is defined as productivity, intelligence, social usefulness or some by cost/benefit ratio. Human life as an exclusively biological or social phenomenon loses its unique charisma, its transcendental essence and its overriding value. To use Pope Francis’ recent terminology, the human being becomes just another commodity in our “throw-away” culture. When this happens, human life is devalued and ultimately human dignity and sanctity are trampled.

The concept of human rights occupies a central place in modern secular political theory. Yet it is hard to understand how this concept can be sustained over time in a thoroughgoing secular view of things, since it has no philosophical or ontological ground in the empirical universe. If we extend this materialistic weltanschauung to its logical conclusion, the ideas of sacrosanct human rights and intrinsic human dignity crumble under the weight of empirical, functional thinking. We see the beginnings of this deterioration already, as countries and groups with abysmal human rights records use the idea in international fora to slander and condemn free countries, and there is little protest against this corruption of the idea. In the end, without the insistence on a spiritual source in human beings, a variety of the empiricist utilitarian Jeremy Bentham’s statement seems inevitable.

He asserted, “Human rights are nonsense and natural human rights are ‘nonsense on stilts.’”

Here is one frightening example: A world famous moral philosopher at Princeton University, Peter Singer, claims that there are situations in which it is ethical to kill an innocent hemophiliac child to enable his parents to raise a healthy child in its place. To the utilitarian Singer, there is no intrinsic value to human life: What yields the most happiness defines what is moral, irrespective of the cost to produce it. Could there be anything more heinous to Jews and Christians who insist that God created each human being in the Divine Image and because of this divine endowment each person possesses an inviolable right to life? Is there any type of thinking more threatening to religious ethics and our religious understanding of the human being?

Thankfully not many in our communities know of Peter Singer, but most people in our communities find the mode of utilitarian ethical thinking compelling even when it comes to human life. This thinking is rampant in much of the public discussion surrounding beginning and end of life dilemmas. And unless we publically profess and argue for a better set of ethical values—ones rooted in the transcendent nature of the human person—moral utilitarianism will become the default ethic in our materialistic culture.

This denial of intrinsic sanctity of human life leads rather quickly to moral relativism, which has become one of the most pervasive beliefs of our time. And from the belief in the relative and subjective nature of all moral values, it is but a short step to a denial of ethics entirely. “Ought” and “moral obligation” are not positivistic, quantifiable or observable phenomena. We are thus left with the undeniable phenomenon of pleasure and its pursuit as a value. Violence against persons saturates the media and popular culture, sometimes appearing as merely another justified form of pleasure. The hedonistic culture is enormously compelling. It is not the arguments of popular atheists like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, or heresy, or rebellion that is creating all the “nones.” It is the allure of secular hedonism as a fulfilling life-style. This should frighten all of us to the core. In the 20th century, we witnessed the tragic results of carrying the denial of the sanctity of human life to its logical conclusion. The fundamental commandment of religious ethics, “Do not murder” and its corollaries to protect and save human life even at great costs were cast aside by Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Today these axiomatic values are greatly weakened, if not often ignored. And just as Hitler took direct aim at the Jewish people and indirect aim at the Church, so too neither Judaism nor Catholicism can thrive, when Imago Dei is denied and these amoral values reign supreme.

Of course, logically if there is no Imago Dei, there can be no Imitatio Dei—acting in the image of God that both Jewish and Christian traditions identify as acting with *caritas* and *hesed*, with love and compassion. What is left is only hard-headed utilitarian policy analysis based on interests and outcomes. Here is another example: A number of Western policy analysts now argue that the best policy regarding the tragic civil war in Syria is to allow both sides to continue to slaughter each other. After all, there are no “good guys” in this war and if either side wins a clear victory, Western interests will be harmed. So although more than 120,000 Syrians have already died and more than 4 million have lost their homes, we should let the killing continue until both sides collapse from exhaustion and each is too weak to threaten Western interests. Peace and human welfare have little value in this realpolitik determined purely by interests. In fact, some evolutionary social scientists now claim that *Homo Sapiens* as a species are “hard-wired for war and killing,” since warfare has been played an integral part of our biological evolution. Once again, there is no value or sanctity to human life, and hence no serious moral imperative to protect innocent human beings or end the killing.

These cultural challenges and their ethic are not peripheral to our religious traditions and communities. They strike at the heart of how our faiths understand the world and human life and of how faithful Jews and Catholics ought to act in our lives.

## II. Religious Irrationality and Violence

The last decades of the 20th century saw an upsurge of religious fundamentalism throughout the world—probably a reaction to the aggressive advance of the secularism I just described. This fundamentalism is devoid of the moderating influence of reason, and it often results in intolerance toward those of different faiths. There has been a perceptible increase of fundamentalism in fervently religious Jewish circles around the world; and in Israel a few religious, hyper-nationalist Jews have acted intolerantly toward Christians and Muslims. These acts are reprehensible, and the perpetrators must be brought to justice and the general problem must be solved immediately.

Yet more horrible is lethal religious extremism and terror. In the first 13 years of our young century, fundamentalist religious violence and terror have metastasized across the Middle East, the Asian subcontinent, and beyond. I spend much time in New York City, within sight of “ground zero,” where religious fanatics killed almost 3,000 innocent souls one hellish morning in September 2001. We meet today not far from the Madrid train stations where religious extremists killed almost 200 innocent Spaniards in 2004. Similar mass murder attacks by religious fanatics occurred in France (1995), London (2005), and Mumbai (2008)—among others. And as I prepared these remarks just 3 weeks ago on Sept. 21, Al Shabab jihadists were gunning down more than 60 innocent people in a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. (There Shabab death squads allowed identified Muslims to go free, and then proceeded to execute men, women and children who were begging for mercy.) Three years before, the Shabab coordinated bombings that killed more than 70 people in Uganda as crowds watched the World Cup matches. In the Middle East—from Egypt to Gaza, to Lebanon to Syria to Iraq and to Afghanistan, extremism makes its satanic way to kill scores of people daily. This violence stems primarily from radical Islamists who are inspired by their extreme understanding of Islam. They act on orders from Islamist religious leaders, who provide religious justification for their murder. I realize that some see this accusation of radical Islamist terror as a form of prejudice—“Islamophobia,”—but I do not believe that to be true. It is not Islam per se and certainly not most Muslims who practice this violence—but a radical minority. This battle is not the Muslims against the Christians and the Jews. It is the extremists vs. the moderates of all faiths. As the present violence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan, makes clear, Islamist fanaticism is killing more Muslim innocents than non-Muslims.

As I indicated, the general trend toward religious violence and intolerance around the world has become so pervasive—so “normal”—that in intellectual circles a terrible thesis is gaining popularity: namely that all monotheism is intolerant in its essence, and, as such, monotheism provides the incentive for violence.

We sit here as Christians and Jews, so I point out that much Islamist violence specifically targets our communities living in the Middle East. Witness the recent burning of churches and murder of Copts in Egypt by the Muslim brotherhood, the killing of Christians by Al Nusra and other jihadists in Syria. In Gaza, half of all Christians have been murdered or evicted since Hamas took control in 2007. Recently on September 22, 2013, Taliban extremists murdered 85 Christians praying on a Sunday morning and burned down the All Saints Church in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Jews have also been prime targets of Islamist extremism in Europe and South America. Last March in Toulouse France, a Muslim terrorist murdered a teacher and three children at a Jewish school. Attacks and threats against Jews in France have escalated since, and many French Jews are leaving France due to these threats. Last July, 5 radical Hezbollah Shi’ites murdered 5 Israeli tourists and their bus driver in Burgas, Bulgaria. And of course we are all aware that Iranian-orchestrated, Hezbollah terrorists blew up the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires in 1994, murdering 85 people simply because they were Jews. Of course, Jews around the world deeply

appreciated Cardinal Bergoglio's (now Pope Francis) strong show of identification with the beleaguered Argentinian Jewish community at that time. In Israel, Muslim religious extremists have murdered or maimed more than 5,700 Israeli civilians between the years 2001-2007 alone. And there continues to be unrelenting violent opposition to Jewish sovereignty and presence in the Holy Land by Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Iranian ayatollahs and the Shi'ite fanatics of Hezbollah. Today more than 100,000 rockets from Hezbollah and Hamas are pointed at the cities of Israel—the Jewish homeland where one out over every two Jews in the world live. And looming darkly over all this is the existential threat to Israelis and the Jewish people if Iran develops a nuclear bomb.

This religious extremism is a radical monism that refuses to grant peace, equality or dignity to any religious other—Jews, Christians and even Sufi Muslims. Middle East Christians are fleeing the region in dramatic numbers. Christians, it is correctly said, are the new Jews of the Middle East. In fact, Israel is the only country in the Middle East where the number of Christians has increased in the last 60 years—by almost 400%! Jews were stateless, vulnerable and unprotected for 1,900 years before the establishment of Israel, so the similar plight of today's Middle East Christians touches us deeply, and we feel an obligation to come to their aid. Jews stand ready to work with Christian leaders to bring an end to their persecution. Of course this must be done carefully to ensure that our attempts to aid do not increase their suffering and isolation.

But Jews and Israelis also are under deep threat—and if they are not fleeing or being systematically persecuted, it is only because they are blessed to have the Israel Defense Forces to protect them from the slaughter.

Theologically, religious extremism and the violence it perpetrates, defames our God, the God of love and compassion, the God who my rabbinic tradition tells me is glorified by the diversity of His human creatures (Mishnah Sanhedrin). Religious violence “drives the shekhinah (God's immanent presence) from the world.

Politically, Islamist violence is killing and banishing God's witnesses—we Jews and Christians. Put simply, both Jews and Christians are minorities under siege by common enemies. According to the New York Times of October 2, Muslim extremists are replacing crosses in Syrian churches with black flags, and teaching Syrian children about the necessity of fighting “infidels”—that is, anyone who is not a Muslim. On September 15 in Dalga Egypt, after Muslim Brotherhood ransacked the town's two churches and looted its Virgin Mary and Father Abraam monastery, the extremists scrawled on the walls, “Egypt is Muslim.” The larger message of Islamists is, “The Middle East is Muslim—and for Muslims only.”

So like the first centuries of the Common Era, the fates of our communities have again become inextricably intertwined. If the irrational religious extremists win, there will be no place for either of us in Dar al Islam—and perhaps beyond. But if the Jewish State is ultimately accepted in the Middle East, the Muslim monopoly on legitimacy will be shattered and principle of religious diversity and non-Muslim equality in that region will be established. This would strengthen the grounds for Christian life and dignity in Middle Eastern political culture. Similarly, should Middle East Christians be accepted as equal and secure citizens in Arab states, that pluralism should make it easier for Jews to live in the region also. God has thrown both of us together. Who knows, like Queen Esther of the Bible, perhaps God has placed Christians and Jews in the Middle East at this time for the purpose of planting tolerance and dignity for all in the region. But conversely, as long as the existence and security of State of Israel is rejected by monist Islamist intolerance, Christians in the region will also be denied dignity, equality and security by Islamist triumphalism. We are thus partners—not only via theology, but also because of the brutal political dynamics of the Middle East.

### III. Religious Scandal

Third, recently there has been a surge in public scandals highlighting grievous moral failures of some religious leaders. The scandals include financial irregularities, sexual abuse, institutional protection of abusers, and statements of racial prejudice and hatred. These incidents occur too frequently to be relegated to mere statistical exceptions or accidental to religious institutions. With today's advanced communications technology in the hands of so many, nothing remains hidden—least of all the sins committed by religious representatives. And when these individual and institutional failings go public, there are widespread and profound corrosive consequences. The horrible behavior by religious figures weakens the belief of the faithful, it drives agnostics further from the synagogue and church, and it strengthens the arguments of people already hostile to religion. There is no need to expand on the horrible impact of these incidents. Surely, we are all human and given to sin, but these lapses by religious leaders and institutions extend beyond personal failure. They reflect directly on the validity our faiths as well as our commitment to the holy life that we proclaim God wants us to lead. In fact, they are desecrations of God's Holy Name that undermine the credibility of our faiths, and cause widespread flight from our communities. To give a new meaning to an old theological category, they are the powerful "negative witnesses" of our times.

#### IV. Conclusion

Surely Jews and Christians can do much to protect ourselves and our faith against these threats. And we can do much of this together. Jews and Christians should see each other as partners in God's covenant with Abraham, our Biblical patriarch. As members of that covenant, both Judaism and Christianity must have a secure future and play a central role in extending blessing to all humanity. "Through you, all the nations of the earth will be blessed," God tells Abraham. Jewish theology has always maintained that if, God forbid, the Jewish people and the Jewish faith disappear, the world and human civilization would end. And I would be surprised if Catholic theology didn't maintain the same about the Church. So we cannot afford to allow these powerful challenges to defeat us and civilization at the same time.

God does not allow us to be mute in history. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik phrased it, "We must to be message-bearing people, charged with krygma."

After the terrible attack on Christians in Peshawar, many Pakistanis realized they needed to ask the most basic question: What kind of Pakistan did they want to have? Cyril Almeida, a journalist with a local newspaper, Dawn, stated,

"Whether out of sympathy, fear or cowardice, no one is willing to stand up to

radical Islamists and say: 'Enough is enough. We must take our country back.'"

My remarks were primarily devoted to laying out how I see the challenges, but allow me to at least outline some responses. How can we "take our culture back"—rescuing it from the ravages of materialism, religious violence, and the physical threats to our peoples? We do not have a powerful media to compete with public materialistic culture. Unlike during the Middle Ages, today there are no metaphysical or philosophic proofs for God, our faith or for spiritual ethics that can persuade those in secular culture. And we have no military weapons, nor governments, nor coercive power to defeat global extremism and violence.

But we do have spiritual truth—successfully tested over thousands of years by our ancestors—and

we can offer deeply committed lives, effective moral suasion, and the power of witness, in word, and, more importantly, in deed. Surely Jews and Christians can be allies in this divine work. Yet we can only do this when we make the decision to engage the world, and not be content to retreat to the echo chambers of our increasingly dwindling faithful communities, or think exclusively within our own self-validating systems.

We can do this by working and by bearing witness before the world to God's covenantal values in a very public and effective voice. Here is how I would frame this witness:

1. We should teach ceaselessly that there is a spiritual center to the universe because the world was created by a loving God, who is intimately involved in human lives and who yearns to redeem His children. Jews and Christians should be unembarrassed about stating this reality, as was Abraham who made God known as the "God of Heaven and Earth." We need to demonstrate as best we can to everyone in modern anthropocentric culture that our religious beliefs can bring blessing and human flourishing to that culture.
2. We also need to emphasize—compellingly but lovingly—that God is the transcendent authority over human life and who establishes the validity of moral values. Although sometimes difficult to apply, moral values are neither relative nor human conventions, but intrinsic parts of the universe that are essential for human flourishing. And fundamental moral values must remain primary to our and to all human endeavor. As covenantal partners, the moral imperative needs to be foremost in both our behavior and our theology. There is no justification for any teleological suspension of the ethical—be the *telos* theological, institutional, political or financial. And as the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Amos insisted, people of God need to understand that the fruit of religious ritual and law correctly lived is ethical purity.
3. We must also proclaim unflinchingly that all persons are created in the Image of God, and hence every human life has intrinsic sanctity that derives from this spiritual quality. Because human life has this transcendent character, human worth cannot be measured solely in utilitarian or materialistic terms. Unfortunately, traditional Jews and religious Catholics are nearly alone in insisting on the intrinsic value of human life, but we must not allow the world to forget this principle. Importantly today, because of every person is created in the Divine Image, any assault on innocent human life is an assault on God that diminishes the Divine Presence in the world.
4. Our theologies should take an informal turn and express themselves as behaviors of caring based on *imitatio dei*—that our religions are primarily neither strict rules, nor impersonal law, nor harsh judgmentalism. As King David stated long ago, "*Olam Hesed Yibaneh*" "The world is built with lovingkindness (Ps. 89:3)". While not becoming "NGO's," a rabbinate and a Church more focused on alleviating the suffering of those both inside and outside the community, victims of injustice, the poor and the needy, will make a compelling argument for the value of religious life to even contemporary secularists — much more so than will any formal theology or religious law. Did not the saintly moral character of R. Israel Meir Kagan (Chafetz Hayim) and the awe-inspiring life of Mother Teresa speak more loudly and exercise more influence on the many than all the sophisticated and obscure theologies known to but a few? Somehow we must be able to show that a life of responsibility and meaning is more fulfilling than a life devoted to pleasure. We have done a poor job of this to date.
5. Lastly, Abraham learned from the trial of the binding of Isaac that God loves human life and abhors death. Thus Abraham's covenantal children must teach that killing in the name of God is contrary to the God of Abraham, and that all forms of religious violence are idolatries that the world must reject. We need to openly acknowledge religious violence when it occurs, dedicate ourselves to defeating it religiously and actively support those who are working to defeat it physically. If we sincerely believe that all humans were created in *imago dei* and in the sacred nature of human life, we must recommit ourselves pursue moderation in thought and policy, and work to strengthen the voices of moderate Muslims —

indeed moderates everywhere.

Through the sacred covenant He has made with us, God asks both Jews and Christians to strive to perfect the world. Our faith must include the belief and commitment to do so. Is this not the very meaning of our messianic belief? With wisdom, cooperation and, of course, God's help, we can meet today's challenges and defeat the threats to Christians and the Church, to the Jewish people and Judaism, and to all who work for the flourishing of the entire human family.

\* Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn is a member of IJCIR (the Israel Jewish Council on Interreligious Relations) and is the American Director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel. He was ordained by the Israeli Rabbinate and earned a PhD. in Moral Philosophy at Columbia University in New York. His books include *The Jewish Connection to the Land of Israel—An Introduction for Christians*, *Two Faiths, One Covenant?*, *End of An Exile*, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, and *Covenant and Hope*. He is currently editing *Zionism, Religion and Violence*, a volume of essays scheduled for publication in the spring of 2014. The American Jewish Committee in Jerusalem recently published his essay, "Christianity in the Eyes of Judaism," in Hebrew for use in educating Israeli rabbis and religious laity about Christianity. The essay is also now being translated into Italian for use by the Italian rabbinate