

Plenary Session

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Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism

Response by Prof. Dr Alan L. Berger

Professor Michael Trainer's excellent analysis suggests that in response to the current and very worrying political and religious crisis we turn to the wisdom of our interreligious Jewish-Christian traditions and the dialogue. This might help create a socio-political atmosphere that seeks peace and criticizes a political and religious agenda obsessed with extremism. "Leaders," he writes, "seem to back away from sane, measured political engagement and social encounter." Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that wages are frozen while capital is exploding. This brings to mind Reverend Martin Luther King Jr's observation that in America there is "socialism for the wealthy and capitalism for the poor." This leads to my meditation on Michael's paper.

In the past three decades religion has been criticized as the cause of wars and hatred, and hailed as an unparalleled source of meaning. Jonathan Swift's caustic observation: "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another but not enough to love one another" summarizes the former position and seems as pertinent today as it was during his lifetime (1667-1745). There have been a plethora of books since the 9/11 attacks on the United States that conceptually have employed Swift's position as their point of departure. One thinks of authors such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Sam Harris, Stephen Hawking, and Christopher Hitchens each of whom in some form or other wish to demonstrate either the flaws in or irrelevancy of religious faith.¹ Collectively, their works are the intellectual grandchildren of Sigmund Freud's skewed understanding of religion as an *illusion*. Religion in the modern as well as the postmodern world, is derided as having lost credibility.

Yet, one of the abiding truths that emerged from the carnage of 9/11 and the rapidly changing demographics in America is that traditional assumptions about civilization are under radical assault. Add to this the fear of immigration that is roiling Europe which, in turn has spawned the politics of rage and the paranoid style of governance which appeals to emotions and abhors reason. Religion has also undergone a great transformation. It frequently appears in the guise of fundamentalism; a belief which absolutizes what a given set of believers assert is the Truth and which pits "true believers" against the Other, i.e., one defined as either a non-believer or a secularist. Religion is far from immune in the face of this development. I will return to this point shortly. It is significant for our purpose to note the 2014 Pew Research Center's study "America's Changing Religious Landscape." This study reports a drop in the number of religiously affiliated Christians. It is certainly true that several critical thinkers do advocate the positive role religion can play both in society and in the lives of individuals. Works prominent here include Mary Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story* (2013); Philip A. Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom* (2015);

and Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), *To Heal a Fractured World* (2005), *The Home We Build Together* (2007), and *Not in God's Name* (2015). But the Pew Report states that only members of non-Christian faiths and the unaffiliated are increasing. Consequently, we need to conceptually expand the rubric "Christian-Jewish Dialogue" when considering responses to the current religious and political crises.

Mainline Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism have also undergone a great transformation. Contemporary religion frequently appears in the guise of fundamentalism; a belief which absolutizes what a given set of believers assert is the Truth and which pits "true believers" against the *other*, i.e., one defined as either a non-believer or a secularist. This has the effect of viewing the world through a Manichaeian lens; good (us) and evil (them). This type of world view has no use for dialogue or for respecting the views of those it deems *other*. Historically, political extremism and religious fundamentalism both appear to be growing in size and in impact. Moreover, they are never on the side of rational discussion. Quite to the contrary, they appear as the twin pillars of an aggressive and ignorant assault on pluralism.

The sociologist Peter Berger attests that Modernity "tends to undermine the taken –for- granted certainties by which people lived through most of history."ⁱⁱ This is "an uncomfortable state of affairs," Berger maintains, "and for many an intolerable one, and religious movements that claim to give certainty have great appeal."ⁱⁱⁱ There is, of course, no greater certainty than that possessed by the fanatic. Berger astutely contends: "Very probably religion in the modern world more often fosters war, both between and within nations."^{iv} Religion is, however, as noted, a two-edged sword. On the one hand, religion can serve as a "sacred canopy" for adherents providing a "plausibility structure" against the absurdity of evil while giving meaning to their existence and a transcendent purpose to their death.^v Yet, on the other hand, religion can also provide *justification* for terror and mass murder of those defined as *infidels* religiously, or as irredeemably *other*..

It is also possible that religion may hold a vital key to opening the door to peaceful co-existence. The challenge, however, is daunting. The Catholic thinker Hans Küng, addressing a 1989 UNESCO Conference on world peace and dialogue among religions pointedly observed: "There will be no peace among nations without peace among the religions, but there can be no dialogue between the religions without each religion engaging in a fundamental re-examination of its basic assumptions." Küng's powerful insight is both a stimulus and a warning. On the one hand, he is calling for religious pluralism. Modernity means interaction among peoples and cultures previously isolated and insulated from each other. There is also a need for mutual learning and for informed teaching. On the other hand, he sounds a caution against triumphalistic assertions. After the Holocaust and subsequent genocides no religion laying claim to moral standing is entitled to assert a cognitive monopoly on theological truth or on salvation.

One further important primary point about contemporary religious fundamentalism. Religious pluralism and modernity itself are under deadly assault from religious absolutists who have no interest in dialogue. The parallel here is provided by a secular culture which, feeling itself unfettered, frequently ends in tyranny and fascism whose duration may vary. Fanatical religion follows a similar path, with a significant difference, its adherents do not feel themselves free of all restraints. Rather, leaders of fundamentalist religions are convinced that they alone know the theological truth. This results in triumphalistic teachings. Fanatics are convinced either that they are acting in the name of their God or, worse, that they themselves have displaced their deity. There is, as noted, no need for dialogue if one has all the answers. Moreover, if God is on one's side, one is by definition always correct .

Our contemporary historical moment is facing a wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment goal of *universalism*. In its place there has emerged a turn toward an exclusivistic *tribalism* that fosters either hatred of the *other* or, just as destructive, indifference. This moment coincides with modernity's increasingly sophisticated technological skills, but seems far less capable of providing *meaning*. We are dealing with a wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment goal of *universalism* and a turn toward an exclusivistic *tribalism* which fosters either hatred of the Other or, just as bad, indifference. Modernity provides sophisticated technology but seems incapable of providing *meaning* to individuals. Subsequently, we have a classic case of increasing skills without a corresponding emphasis on humane values. Religion at its best provides its adherents with a coherent and life-affirming identity. However, when this identity deteriorates into an "us versus them" world view, tension rather than dialogue ensues. This is clearly the case with migrants who become the dreaded and feared *other*, labelled criminals ("murderers and rapists" in the inaccurate and intemperate words of Mr Trump) against whom one must do battle, or as those who "steal" our jobs. Religion provides its adherents with an identity.

Emerging from the devastation of World War II and the horror of the Holocaust, the Western Democracies charted a course which for the most part emphasized progressive values economically, politically and religiously. But the era of brotherhood and cohesion did not last long. The erosion of these progressive values began appearing in all three areas. The war was over. It was time to get back to business.

In America Rabbi Jim Rudin's important 2006 book *The Baptizing of America* traces the fundamentalist's assault on the separation of church and state. Breaking down this wall of separation means that politics is on the way to becoming subservient to religion. Those who would *baptize* America assert biblical inerrancy; if there is a conflict between the Bible and the Constitution, biblical assertions are given priority. But there is nothing resembling scientific biblical study. Rather this biblical supremacy is based on fundamentalist readings and attitudes toward the text. Rabbi Rudin utilizes the old/new term *Christocrats* to describe those intent on "converting America into a *Christocracy*. Rudin also alerts his readers to the movement known as "Dominionism" which is a "strident form of evangelical Protestant Christianity (seeking) total 'dominion' over the United States, its people, and ultimately the entire world." These two phenomena have found great acceptance among the Republican Party, many of whose adherents believe that the GOP stands for "God's Own Party." Many of Rudin's most worrisome predictions seem pale in comparison with the contemporary American religio-political rhetoric emerging from Republican leadership.

Alongside of this development there has emerged a loss of trust in politicians and political democracy. Presidential assassinations, resignations, impeachments, and the rise of the Tea Party have bred a cynicism which yields fertile soil for the emergence of grievance politics and a kind of ersatz populism that masks an unprecedented political and moral corruption. Many in the Evangelical community appear to have relinquished morality in favor of getting the "right" Supreme Court justices appointed. Massive amounts of money are spent on political campaigns and on influence peddling. Martin Luther King Jr. long ago noted three evils of American society; Racism, Excessive materialism, and Excessive militarism. These three cancers continue to metastasize.

There is some good news to report. Progressive voices were of course heard. Abraham Joshua Heschel, Professor of Jewish Mysticism and Social Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary marched with Doctor King in Selma. Afterward, Heschel observed "Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying." The great Protestant thinker Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

From these examples one learns that theological acumen needs to be wed to practical ethical action in the political sphere. This includes the importance of voting which is a pillar of the democratic process.

But economically driven dislocation, unemployment, a growing gap between the rich and poor, and a feeling on the part of those less fortunate of being ignored by the elites combined to form the breeding ground for the likes of Mr Trump. Abraham Lincoln in his failed senatorial bid in Illinois, stated the situation in poetic terms: “A house divided,” he said, “cannot stand.” On the micro-level we see the sad results of Lincoln's prophetic words unfolding in America where the spectacle of the demise of civility and the growth of hatred are all too prominent. We are also experiencing the dangerous and combustible messages of incitement stemming from the highest office in the land.

On the macro-cosmic level, we see these same forces at work in America's relations with the European Union and NATO, long term American allies whom the president regularly bashes while simultaneously embracing President Putin, a dangerous enemy of America and the sponsor of an assault on democracy and the EU. Moreover, given the American signal and fuelled by the immigration crisis, far-right anti-democratic and xenophobic political movements are emboldened in their determination to stymie political democracy. I was struck by Professor Judith Frishman's reference to this “sad moment” in her keynote address. It is indeed a sad moment. It is not, however, the first such moment and doubtless will not be the last.

In 1944 Albert Camus was writing a novel in a farm house not far from the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where five thousand primarily Protestant villagers (Huguenots) saved five thousand Jews. The novel's title: *La Peste*, (*The Plague*). The book told the tale of events in Oran, a town overrun by rats which had emerged from their subterranean hiding places and were spreading plague among the town's terrified residents. Following a long struggle and after many fatalities, the rats disappeared and the town folk celebrated wildly. But Dr Bernard Rieux, Oran's heroic physician, knew that the rats would one day reappear.

The *Plague* is a parabolic novel about antisemitism and Nazism. I think it not too far off course to suggest that the rats-symbolized by the names with which Michael opens his paper: Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un and Rodrigo Duterte – have re-appeared. I do not call these men rats. But I believe they have a rodent's instincts to sew fear and discord. Seizing on popular unrest and anxiety they exacerbate rather than ameliorate feelings of un-ease especially concerning immigrants who are accused of threatening the country. The American president routinely terms the free press “the enemy of the people.”

Of course, this seems almost “tame” in contrast to his friend Mr Putin who orders the murder of journalists. All of the above mentioned politicians have no tolerance for dissent. They rule by fear and lies, and have nothing but disdain for civil discourse and an independent judiciary.

To fight back against extremism and fundamentalism what are some steps to take? The first step is to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation. Given the anxiety of contemporary culture it is best to face squarely the threat to religious pluralism and individual freedom. The next, and continuing, effort is to form coalitions to protest and to fight for justice. Professor Ruth Langer reports that all branches of Judaism joined together, a near messianic phenomenon, to protest President Trump's cruel and heartless separation of migrant children from their parents; in effect kidnapping them. Rabbi David Sandmel notes that two large gifts were made to the Anti-Defamation league following Trump's absurdist claim that there were “good people on both sides” in Charlottesville, where neo-Nazis were countered by democracy advocates. One neo-Nazi drove his car into a crowd of democracy advocates killing one young woman and injuring many others. Coalitions of Catholic and Protestant groups have

rallied against racist and antisemitic behavior and actions. While the earlier mentioned Pew Report caused considerable agonizing on the part of many mainstream Christian and Jewish leaders, one additional encouraging sign is that one encouraging sign is that *secularists* and non-religious *altruists* have joined in the considerable push back against extremism. This fact will certainly focus attention on the question of whether one needs to be religious to have an ethic that demands response in the face of intolerance and fascism.

One last observation. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, great grandson of Israel ben Eliezer, founder of the Hasidic movement, and precursor of Franz Kafka, asserted: “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.” I take this to mean in the present crisis, that knowing the worst we can fight even harder for the best. This means that it is imperative to take seriously the demands of civic responsibility and to advocate for democratic values. We have already stressed the importance of voting. Free and fair elections are a corner stone of democracies. But so is temperate and thoughtful language. In the final analysis, we might all pause for a moment and reflect on the text *Pirke Avot* which puts forth a “trinity” of observations: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If not now, when. If I am for myself only, than what am i?” Political extremism and religious fundamentalism unfortunately stop after the initial assertion. This is the crucial challenge of our time.

ⁱ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2007); Sam Harris *The end of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2005); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2010); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve 2007). Each of these works presents a reductionist and, therefore, flawed vision of religion and its role in human existence.

ⁱⁱ Peter L. Berger. “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, edited by Petr L. Berger (Grand Rapids: Erdmans 1999) 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid., 15.

^v Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969) chapter 3.