

Bosnia, India and the Way We Are

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Abstract (summary)

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"One is embarrassed to be called religious' in the face of religious failure to keep alive the image of God in the face of man." I recall those words of my teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Who can be proud of religion reading, examining the daily reports of violence between Christians and Muslims and the resulting slaughter of innocents in Bosnia? Mass rape camps are established to humiliate and torture Muslim girls and women. Who can be proud of religion reading of what is happening in India over the status of the Mosque in Ayodhya? Muslims and Hindus are killing each other in the name of God. So are Christians and so are Muslims.

The newspapers hardly scratch the surface. I have just finished reading and commend to your reading a chilling letter from the distinguished reporter, David Rieff, in the New Yorker magazine. To read it is to experience a shock of recognition. What one hears through the rubble and the ashes and the twisted bodies is a taunting voice: "ever again."

Murderers have learned the semantics of death. Fifty years ago, officials did not speak of extermination, only of "final solution"; today officials do not speak of genocide, but of "ethnic cleansing" or "ethnic shifting." In any event, genocide is not a single event. It is a process, that Jews can relate to. First you bar non-Serbs, Muslims from employment as managers and senior positions, from handling financial transactions. Then you fire them from their jobs, remove their health insurance. You practice "elitocide," the concerted effort to kill as many educated Muslims as possible. You unite the mob by calling for unity. That is the scream from the Serbian ruler Slobodon Milosevic, "Samo sloga srbina spasava" - only unity can save the Serb. Do we not remember the ranting of the Nazis, "Ein Volk, ein Fuehrer, ein Vaterland"?

And what do you do with those with whom you have lived but are not of your faith. They still look like you. Understand that deep down they are foreigners, strangers, aliens, not flesh of our flesh nor blood of our blood. Strip them of their human mask.

The reporter, David Rieff, tells of a Muslim man in a city of Bosnia where Muslims were massacred. The city is Bosanski Petrovac. One of the Muslims reports that he had been "forced by his captors to bite off the penis of a fellow Muslim." Mr. Reiff explains that the Muslim men are circumcised and Serbian men are not. "If you say that a man is not human

but the man looks like you and the only way to identify the devil is to make him drop his trousers." "Europa Europa" revisited with a vengeance.

What a terrible embarrassment to religion and what an awesome warning. Religion is sacred. And the sacred is powerful. People die for the sake of religion. But people murder for the sake of religion. Does it make a difference whether or not you are religious or whether or not you believe in God? It does. But what is important is not whether you say you are or are not religious, not whether or not you believe in God, but what kind of religion it is that you believe in, and what kind of God it is that you worship. Better an atheist with a good heart than a believer with a cruel God.

Look at the religious wars around us. It is pandemic. No religion is immune to the excesses of fanaticism. In another part of the world fundamentalist Hindus destroy and pillage and kill Muslims in 1992 because they claim that when the Mosque in Ayodhya was built in 1528 by Mogul invaders it was built over the birthplace of the Hindu warrior king and demi-god Lord Rama.

Hindu fundamentalists centuries later insist that they must reclaim the place and build a shrine to Lord Rama. Hundreds of thousands of barefoot Hindu pilgrims, white-bearded Hindu priests, long-haired Swamis draped in ascetic yellow and saffron robes rip apart the Mosque at Ayodhya, smash the domes, the walls with pick axes, shovels and sharp-edged tridents, the symbol of Shiva, the god of destruction. Muslim men, women, children are stoned. A mob of 200,000 to 300,000 Hindus all bent on destroying a 16th-century Mosque.

Fanaticism is difficult to contain; the poisons of fundamentalism are contagious. Hindu-Muslim riots occur all over India, in Pakistan, in Afghanistan, in Bhutan, in Kashmir, in Sri Lanka. One cries out 'Jai Sri Ram' or 'hail Lord Ram'; another cries out "Allahu akhbar" or "God is great."

Fanaticism is cut from one cloth. The conviction that God speaks to you and only to you, that God cares only about you and yours and chooses only you, rejecting all others is a fundamentalist virus that contaminates the world. Do you think that those Jewish pietists who sought to bomb the Dome of the Rock because they are convinced that the Temple must be built on that particular soil are different from the Hindu mob at Ayodhya?

The result of mad religion is hatred and violence and shame. Pity Moses, pity Jesus, pity Mohammed, pity Mahatma Gandhi. Was it for this that they gave their lives?

I read the newspapers and think of that sad Yiddish proverb -- "If God lived on earth, people would knock out all His windows." I read the papers and think back on the book of Genesis, specifically of the first fratricide. The Bible does not say why Cain killed Abel, though the Midrash suggests that it was out of the conceit that Cain was God's favorite son. The whole earth was divided between Cain and Abel. They had enough between them, but they quarreled because each of them said that the Temple of the Lord must be built on their soil and only on their property. So property, place and possession are sacred. Love, decency and peace have no shrine. Choose me God, and not him or her, choose this place and no other. The luster of chosenness can quickly tarnish into cruelty. Beware of extremism, even perhaps especially in the name of God.

Sen. John Danforth of Missouri is also an Episcopal priest. Observing the rise of fanaticism in northern Ireland, Palestine, Sudan, India, the Middle East, he observes, "Most if not all the world's trouble spots, religious extremism is at the heart of the problem."

Religious people should be especially aware of the power of religious extremism. Crime in the name of God is the greatest crime against God. And when religion is mixed with nationality, when religion is linked with the state, the most volatile combination is formed.

Every human, earthly energy is ambivalent, including religion. The state, science, education, finance are ambiguous. Therefore, it requires wisdom to distinguish between the powers that build, construct, improve the lot of mankind and those that lead to murder. God's gifts are ambivalent: they can be desecrated or consecrated.

Elie Wiesel is said to have been asked whether the world learned anything from the Holocaust. Mr. Wiesel is reported to have responded, "Yes, that you can get away with it." That would offer a posthumous victory to Hitler. The lesson of the Holocaust must be different. The answer must be that you can't get away with it. And that was the response of the United States and the United Nations in Somalia against the looting, murderous war-lords. We will not let you get away with it. You will not starve innocent men, women and children with impunity.

Some now argue that since there appears to be no end to suffering, our response must be contained. How much can one be concerned? The call for relief intervention will not end with Somalia or Yugoslavia; it will go on to Sudan and Liberia and to Mozambique. There must be limits to feeling, else we are exhausted. That is a false prudence. There are things over which we cannot place limits.

Do we not study daily in our morning prayer: "In the fulfillment of some mitzvot no fixed measure is imposed: leaving the corner of the field for the poor...acts of charity and righteousness? There are no jurisdictional bounds that circumscribe compassion. That is the moral imperative of the Jewish Biblical ethos: "You shall not stand by the innocent blood of your neighbor."

Have we learned nothing from the Holocaust? George Shultz, the former Secretary of State, put it sharply: "When we say never forget, never again,' what are we talking about? What is it that we shouldn't forget? Of course, the Jews in Germany. We know what happens if anti-Semitism gets out of hand. But more broadly we're saying, when forces of intolerance go wild, the result is basically intolerable." When we say "never again," it means we say we will not stand for that.

There are memories of these days that we will not want to forget. Memories for us and our children of the deep unanimity with which the Jewish community responded to the atrocities of Bosnia. The Conservative Movement, the Reform Movement, the Reconstructionist Movement, the Orthodox Movement, the Synagogue Council of America, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council all joined together issuing a joint resolution of the American people: "We cannot stay silent, we will not. The dying in Somalia and the killing in Bosnia and elsewhere, in the former Yugoslavia must stop. We call upon the President and our nation's other leaders to redouble our nation's efforts to promote an immediate and lasting end to the violence in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, to insure the relief supplies intended to sustain life in both lands, in fact reach the suffering people who so desperately await them. To announce our government's readiness to approve an emergency refugee program and the budget that supports it, thereby permitting up to 25,000 additional refugees from the former Yugoslavia to come to our shores, and to encourage European and other nations to open their doors as well, understanding that the rights of all those displaced by violence can return to their homes in the immediate future are inviolate."

This resolution has had an unusual impact upon the President and upon the United Nations. It was joined by the National Council of Churches, the United States Catholic Conference, the National Council of Catholic Bishops, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

Our memories should record that Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres promptly called upon the nation of Yugoslavia to end the bloodshed, announced that Israel was sending medicine and food to all civilians, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee opened a special relief fund for refugees and displaced persons and helped refugees flee war zones. Early in the conflict, five tons of food and medical supplies for non-sectarian people were sent. New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis could not help but note that the earliest and most persistent voices calling alarm of the second genocidal tragedy in this century came from Jewish quarters.

That Jewish response to suffering has a long and proud history. A Rebbe summed up the way Jews are mandated to act. "Above all, do not despair. Do not let yourself go. Get into harness and carry the yoke of the kingdom." That altruistic compassion expresses the depth of Jewish faith. The God of Judaism, the God of the Bible, is not the philosophical unmoved Mover, but the Most Moved Mover.

Edmund Burke is quoted as saying, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," to which we may add, "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for the good men to feel nothing." That is the test of our humanity, of our Jewish being: "I feel, therefore I am." "We feel, therefore we are."