

*Eugene J. Fisher*

## Religious Extremism— Sources and Antidotes

We live today in the Western world in a post-“Enlightenment” age. We enjoy the fruits of a system of democratic checks and balances in which minority rights, especially religious rights, are properly safeguarded by law and custom. What has “enlightened” us, as the inheritors of seventeen centuries of European history, is precisely the horrors and tragedies of our distinctly unenlightened past. The Crusades and the Inquisition, witch burnings and countless massacres of Jews, the Thirty Years’ War and the Hundred Years’ War, persecution not only of Protestants by Catholics, but of Catholics by Protestants, of Protestants by Protestants, and by everybody of Jews. It caught up with us. As the martyred Yitzhak Rabin said in shaking hands with his life-long foe, “Enough of blood!” Rabin chose life, and life is what Western civilization chose, beginning with its American branch a bit over two hundred years ago, in choosing a system of government in which separation of Church and state would be a firm, unassailable (if somewhat ambiguous) principle.

It was not always so. Our roots in the West go deep. They are not merely “European but in fact essentially Mediterranean: Middle Eastern and Greek and Roman. Here, in these roots, I would argue, lie also the roots of intolerance and religious extremism—at least our form of it, the form we must learn to cope with and control, if not entirely heal.

### 1. THE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM. CASE I: MONOTHEISM.

It has been argued that monotheism is itself a form of religious extremism. The argument is compelling in many ways. Monotheism was a very radical innovation in the tenth century B.C.E. “No other gods before me” was not a threat to the ancient world order. It could be interpreted to mean a simple, exclusive fealty oath to one’s tribal or city-state god. Such loyalties could be exchanged when one moved into a new city state. But “Hear O Israel, the LORD is your God, the Lord alone!” is another matter. Especially with a God, and a system of commandments issued by

that God, that will follow the tribe/ city/state/nation/ethnos around wherever it goes. And not just attached to an ark, but anywhere—Babylon, the Diaspora, wherever.

The “reforms” of Israel’s leaders (the one’s given good marks in the Bible precisely for so doing) attempting to live up to this “jealous” God did not exemplify what we today would call “respect for religious pluralism,” or even the lesser value, tolerance. Baal was not only defeated, his followers were forced to convert or else.

The biblical system was not at all racially or ethnically exclusive, only religiously so. Only monotheism would be allowed to survive. All “hill shrines” were to be destroyed, all household gods smashed. Ultimately, the logic of monotheism (One Land, One People, One Religion) lead to its conclusion: One Land, One People, One Temple. The reform of King Josiah, celebrated in the Bible as an exemplar of the just and faithful king, meant the suppression of all non-temple places of sacrifice even to Yahweh.

This was strange behavior in the ancient world, which honored pantheons of gods. While each group or clan or family figured its god was the best, it did not deny the divinity of other folks’ gods or the validity of their religions. The proof was practical. If we won, our gods were stronger than yours, at least for now, and you might consider switching, at least for now. Not so with the Israelites! For them, nobody else had any gods. Only they did.

Stranger still the Israelites first and then the Jews held on to their notion of the Oneness of God even in military defeat and occupation and persecution and incalculable suffering for their faith. But that is another story—one in which the positive side of exclusivist monotheism emerges. For now, however, I am working on the negative side, the *yetser ha ra* (evil inclination) of the monotheistic obsession with the Oneness of God rather than the *yetser ha tov* (inclination toward the good) of how it saved the Jewish People, improbably, throughout a history almost too tragic to contemplate.

But in the beginning, the first half millennium or so, monotheism was decidedly bad news for religious minorities in Israel. They ceased to exist—although the system did make allowance for “the alien in our midst” in a fashion unprecedented then and hard to rival now, what with the intolerance of immigrants in Europe and North America alike. If one truly believes that there is only one God (not just a best among gods), then it becomes a fail-

ure of charity and justice to allow people under one's control and therefore responsibility to think, pray, and act otherwise.

The tendency of monotheism both to fracture and to battle until a winner is announced can be seen in the subsequent history of Judaism. While Jacob Neusner rightly speaks of the "Judaisms" of the first century, and while one can perceive various "Judaisms" today (albeit all forms of rabbinic Judaism), a century or two after the destruction of the Temple there was one winner—Rabbinic Judaism—and a lot of losers (Sadducees, Essenes, etc.—i.e., most of the groups mentioned in the New Testament).

Out of this milieu of an uncharacteristically pluralistic period in Jewish history (up to then) emerged yet another group of radical exclusivist Jews. Not only was God "One"—but the Way to him was one—his Son, Jesus Christ. Now of course it took some centuries for the "Oneness" and exclusivism of Christianity to settle in (i.e., to "win"). Perhaps the reason for this was the movement's early preoccupation with the Judaism from whence it came—how to be different yet linked with its Jewish past was a major concern of Paul, the gospel authors, Justin Martyr and, indeed, a good percentage of the Church Fathers. In the theological ambiguities of these early centuries lie the possibilities for finding sources in the tradition to validate openness to Judaism today.

But it did settle in. The fashion of settling was interesting. Like the true monotheist tradition that it was, Christianity strove to absorb or to eradicate every differing faith group that it encountered. With the power of the Roman Empire (late fourth century) behind it, it began to succeed. Temples were destroyed or turned into churches. Pagan rites became historical memories or calendric clues known only to some, but not functioning in the general psyche (Wednesday = Woden's Day, March = Mars' Month, etc.).

Conspicuously different in treatment were synagogues. Jewish worship was allowed to survive and, if it kept its place, to thrive. Curious. Christianity learned intolerance from the monotheism of Judaism but, out of respect for its elder teacher, began to practice perhaps for the first time a principled tolerance. But only for Judaism. No other religion save Judaism continued to be a *religio licita* in the Roman Empire once Christianity had achieved hegemony.

## 2. THE AMBIGUOUS LOGIC OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM. CASE II: JEWS IN CHRISTENDOM: THE FIRST MILLENNIUM.

And so it continued, with minor exceptions such as in the Iberian peninsula (always a special case!) for the rest of the first

millennium of the common era and into the beginning of the second. Jews lived as a legally tolerated group in Christendom, kept from positions of authority over Christians for fear of the continuing attractiveness of Judaism to Christians, but able to appeal to canon law and the protection of the popes when local secular rulers or clergy wished to exploit them. Judaism as a valid worship of God was acknowledged to have its place, albeit a distinctly secondary place, while the conversion of Jews to the greater truth of Christianity awaited God's good time in the divine plan of salvation. Augustine had developed and the popes, beginning with Gregory the Great, had implemented a theologically ambiguous but practically tolerant vision of how Christendom's "Jewish problem" (to use much later and very anachronistic language) could be handled in practice.

Jews, Augustine wrote, were like donkeys who carried the Word of God (the Hebrew Bible) on their backs without being able to read them (by which he meant understand the sacred texts in a properly Christian fashion). Since the Christian faith depended on a Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (provided by the New Testament), the Jewish witness to the validity of the Bible was seen as a necessary underpinning for Christian claims. The underlying theology had been battled out already in the second century when the ideas of Marcion of Pontus, who taught that the Old Testament revealed a different God than the New Testament and therefore should be suppressed, had been condemned by the early Church Fathers as one of the first heresies to be identified in Christian history. The New Testament does not and cannot stand on its own. It "fulfills" the Old but does not supersede or replace it as Marcion had erroneously taught. The Christian Bible, Old and New, is one whole, with the former culminating in the latter. The New, it was understood that early, made no sense except in relationship to God's Word in the Old. Augustine applied this sense of veneration for the inspired nature of the Hebrew Bible to the people who had preserved the divine revelation and witnessed to it. The Church has the responsibility to preserve and protect the Bible as God's revelation to humankind. Likewise, for Augustine, the Church must preserve and protect the Bible's authors and bearers, the Jews, even if they have not yet come to understand its true meaning as revealed in the New Testament.

So Gregory the Great and the popes after him down through the centuries implemented legislation that on the one hand protected the Jews (all the while lamenting their "blindness" and

praying for their conversion) and on the other protected the Christian people from being attracted to convert to Judaism. Synagogues could be built, but not so grand as to compete with the central place of the great cathedrals. It became a matter of excommunication for Christians to disrupt Jews when they were praying. There were local laws governing relations between the groups, inevitably to the advantage of Christians. And as late as the ninth century there were local laws prohibiting such practices as Christians asking rabbis to bless their fields. One does not prohibit what is not occurring.

A telling symbol of this theologically triumphalist but in practice relatively tolerant approach of the medieval church can be seen to this day on the portals of the early Gothic cathedrals of France, such as Chartres. The doorway is flanked by two statues, one of the church, one of the Synagogue. They are depicted as equally beautiful women. But the church is resplendent, erect, triumphant, while the Synagogue is shown blindfolded, with the tablets of the Law falling out of her hands and the staff of Moses broken. She is a poignant figure, tragically blind to her own destiny, a theological polemic, but she is quite human, in no way evil or demonic as Jews would be depicted in Europe in later centuries. What happened?

### 3. THE LOGIC OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM. CASE III: THE SECOND MILLENNIUM.

What happened to change the ambiguous but relatively tolerant treatment of Jews that prevailed in Christendom for its first millennium into the late medieval portrait of a severely oppressed and often brutalized minority held in theological and civil contempt with which we are all too familiar today? In brief, what happened took place nine hundred years ago. In 1096 the First Crusade was launched. Christendom was under siege. Islam had taken the lands and peoples of Asia Minor, the Middle East and North Africa, which had been Christian for centuries, and was threatening Europe itself, from both East and West. Christendom conceived a counterattack that was as religiously motivated as it was geopolitically necessary: Liberate Jerusalem!

This was a fine idea, perhaps, but it certainly lost something in practice. The mass of Crusaders gathered in the Rhineland (an area that in retrospect we can see was not coincidentally to become modern Germany) decided to ignore both the religious and the geopolitical reasons for the Crusade and go off on their own. Why go all the way to the Middle East and risk being killed, the

chroniclers report their reasoning, when we can kill infidels right at home? Now Jews were not, as it happened, “infidels” in the eyes of the Church. They fit in between “fideles” and “infideles” in the Church’s Good Friday prayer, as “half-believers” or *perfideles* (a word that in later centuries would take on the ominous overtones of “perfidious,” but which originally was a more neutral, somewhat ambiguous theological category.) So, over the strong, vocal opposition of the pope who had called the Crusade and much of the local hierarchy, the Rhineland Crusaders began the first massive slaughter of Jews in Christian history. A millennium-long tradition of uneasy tolerance was ended in bloodshed and forced conversions claiming tens of thousands of Jewish victims, martyred, the Church today humbly acknowledges, for their heroic witness to the truth of the revelation given to them by God.

What happened in the ensuing centuries is a case study of religious extremism carried to its worst extreme. First there was an escalation of the religious polemic against Jews and Judaism. The portrait of Jews as “blind” began to be replaced by a qualitatively different portrait. Jews were depicted as demonic, in league with the devil, not simply ignorant but embodiments of evil. The earliest texts of Passion plays that we have are from the Benediktbeuern Monastery in Germany that also gave us the *Carmina Burana* songs. They portray Jews as a “filthy” and “accursed race,” bloodthirsty and wholly evil. In merry old England in the twelfth century the infamous blood libel charge was first hurled against a Jewish community and then used to rationalize their expulsion. The charge, though consistently condemned by the popes over the centuries, proved devastatingly irrefragable, especially as “perfected” (again perhaps not coincidentally in the Rhineland region of what was to become Germany).

Then came a raft of charges in which Jews were accused of almost everything that might go wrong in a given community. Many of these charges, such as the notion that Jews had poisoned the wells to bring on the Black Plague in the thirteenth century, were meticulously rejected by the popes. It was pointed out, among other arguments, that the Jews relied on the same wells for their own drinking water and would hardly wish to poison themselves. Arguments from reason and authority, however, had little effect on burgeoning irrational hatred and scapegoating. The poignant image of the blind Synagogue from the Cathedral at Chartres was replaced by the infamous *Judensau* on the Cathedral of Regensburg.

In this period, too, Church leaders began for the first time to examine the Talmud for evidence of "heresy." Now this was a curious notion, in a way, since only "believers" could be guilty of heresy properly so called. So the logic of the Talmud burnings (which were *not* objected to by the popes) in Paris, Rome, and elsewhere, ironically depended on a tacit acknowledgment of the legitimacy and validity of Jewish belief!

The expulsions of the Jews culminated in 1492 with that from Spain. Convert or leave. The logic is familiar. The cry: "One nation, One religion!" became the order of the day throughout Western Europe, with the fascinating exception of the Italian peninsula, where medieval canon law continued to prevail, and where many of the exiles from Spain found refuge at the direct order of the pope. But even in Italy laws were enacted, such as those of the Fourth Lateran Council, restricting Jews to ghettos and (picking up an idea invented by Muslims to keep track of their *dhimmi*-status "peoples of the book," i.e., Jews and Christians) mandating distinctive clothing so Christians would be able to identify the Jews in their midst and presumably not be polluted by too much contact with them. In Spain the Inquisition was developed to hunt out, again, heretics. This had a devastating effect on the converted Jews who had remained after 1492 since the suspicion was that people who had been forced to convert might be less than enthusiastic in their new faith.

What had happened? My own theory is that the mindless violence perpetrated by the first crusaders took its toll in guilt. But the guilt was not acknowledged and confessed. Christendom proved incapable of repenting from the Rhineland blood lust. It rationalized the murders, blaming the victims and thus exonerating the perpetrators. The rationalization (the Jews deserved what they got!) then took on its own life, rationalizing further depredations and attacks on Jews until a tolerated religious minority had become a despised and therefore feared "stranger" in Europe's midst. The oppressed Jews of the ghettos, ironically, were to be freed in the nineteenth century only to face a far worse danger: the invention of modern racial, pseudo-scientific anti-semitism. In an enlightened and secularized Europe, ripped free of the moral restraints imposed by religious leadership, a new view of Jews and of the Jewish "problem" began to evolve. Jews, Voltaire and others argued, formed a distinct "race" which could not be assimilated into European society no matter how hard they might try. So where Christianity prayed for and sometimes forced conversion, the new millennial reign of Nazi theory led in

a dizzyingly short time to the death camps—an idea wholly foreign to and impossible within the medieval vision of the place of the Jews even at its worst.

But that again is another story. For now let me conclude with a brief look at the other side of the coin, the logic of religious extremism as exemplified in the assassin Yigal Amir.

#### 4. RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM.

##### CASE IV: THE MURDER OF YITZHAK RABIN.

By concluding with a Jewish example, I do not mean in any sense to equate the Christian sins of centuries with a lone and isolated case. To the contrary, I have been profoundly impressed with the honesty and depth of Jewish reflections on the Rabin assassination and the Jewish community's quite remarkable ability to confront a form of religious extremism as soon as it emerged from within itself. Had the Christian community in 1096 admitted and reflected morally on the evil done by the Rhineland Crusaders with anything anywhere near the passion and rigorous self-examination (*heshbon hanefesh*) exemplified by the Jewish people today, the tragic and violent second millennium of Jewish-Christian relations would not have occurred.

Yigal Amir, it first needs to be said, is not a nut. His action appears to have been the direct consequence of taking the logic of one aspect of his deep faith to an extreme which blinded him to other elements of Judaism. These, as ancient and central as those he chose to follow, would have prevented him from lawless violence, just as the moral restraints of medieval Christianity for centuries at least inhibited Christian violence against Jews. The uninhibited violence of the twentieth century was only able to erupt in Europe, many scholars today maintain, when those cultural and religious restraints of Christendom were broken down by the triumph of enlightened secular humanism.

The response of the Jewish community as a whole has been remarkable, a witness to the profound sense of moral balance that lies at the heart of Judaism. Speaking to and for the modern Orthodox community in the U.S., Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik condemned the act as “a badge of shame” on the Jewish people. There is no prevarication here, no attempt to wiggle out of the sense of moral guilt by trying to portray Amir as an aberration or a mentally disturbed individual whose misdeed had nothing to do with his Jewishness. There is a direct confrontation with evil, not a shrinking away from it. This articulates, in the truest sense,

Judaism's call to *teshuvah* (repentance), a theology which Christianity shares but does not often enough put into practice.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein of the Alon Sh'vut yeshiva in the Etzion bloc in Israel was quoted in the New York *Jewish Week* as having addressed his students after the assassination in the following way:

Here was a man (Amir) who grew up in the best of our institutions. A day before the murder, he could have been cited as a shining example of success and achievement, a source of communal pride. Coming from a "deprived" background, he studied in a yeshiva high school, attended a great yeshivat hesder, and was accepted to the most prestigious division of Bar-Ilan University. . . . If a day before the murder we would have said proudly, "See what we have produced," we must say it now as well—"See what we have produced."

God-intoxicated, Amir seems to have achieved a sense of absolute certainty in the rightness and righteousness of the religious vision taught to him. With a faith unchecked by awareness of its own finitude and limited status as a mere approximation of the divine Truth it seeks to reflect, the aspects of Jewish teaching that should have restrained his fervid logic simply could not or were not brought to bear. Somewhere in his yeshiva career he should have read the biblical and rabbinic lessons of compassion and respect for the other as equally created in the image of God that is of the very essence of Judaism. But his vision of created origins, it seems, was blurred by his vision (also profoundly Jewish) of the imminence of the messianic end-time. Rabin was not just an Israeli leader who had wrong ideas. Rabin was demonic—an evil block to the messianic kingdom, a creature in league with the devil. In short, Rabin for Amir seems to have ceased to exist in the real world of fallible human beings and become something more and something less than human, and so not worthy of the ethical treatment afforded to humans.

This scenario, of course, is highly speculative and may well be wrong. I do not know Yigal Amir, much less the inner workings of his mind and soul. But the lesson drawn out by Jewish leaders such as Rabbis Soloveichik and Lichtenstein is most appropriate to our topic and to our world today. One must be faithful to the whole of one's religious tradition. Religion, especially a monotheistic religion, can be a dangerous thing when we forget the moral restraints imposed by our prophets and sages over the centuries.

Love for God with one's whole soul is central to both Judaism and Christianity. But love for God, as a first century Jew whose teachings are too often ignored by his followers once pointed out, must be linked to and is tested in love for other human beings. I pray that the third millennium of Jewish-Christian relations will allow our two ancient traditions to witness together to this simple but seemingly difficult truth of our common revelation.

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*Dr. Eugene J. Fisher is associate director of the secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington. He is an internationally known expert in Christian-Jewish relations.*