Religious Extremism is Ugly...and Dangerous

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The Jerusalem Post, September 6, 2017, published the following: In an astonishingly vitriolic attack on progressive Jews, Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Shlomo Amar said that Reform Jews "deny more than Holocaust deniers....Today there was a hearing on the Kotel on the petition of the cursed evil people who do every iniquity in the world against the Torah – they even marry Jews and non-Jews," said Amar...They don't have Yom Kippur or Shabbat, but they want to pray [at the Western Wall]. But no one should think that they want to pray. They want to desecrate the holy. They are trying to deceive and say that extremist Haredim invented [prayer arrangements at the Western Wall]...It's like Holocaust deniers, it's the same thing. They shout, 'Why are there Holocaust deniers in Iran?' They deny more than Holocaust deniers."

Reading these words, uttered by the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem and former Chief Rabbi of Israel, is profoundly distressing. They reflect the self-righteous religious arrogance characteristic of zealots who demean and oppress those who do not share their beliefs. Has Rabbi Amar ever sat down with Reform rabbis and dealt with them as fellow Jews and fellow human beings? Has he ever given serious thought to Reform theology? Certainly, as an Orthodox rabbi, he does not accept Reform; he sees Reform as a force for undermining the authority of halakha and the divinity of Torah. But does he think that calling names enhances the position of Orthodox Judaism? Does he think that it is intellectually or morally acceptable to slander opponents, or that such slander will convince anyone of the truth of Orthodoxy or the falsity of Reform?

When anyone thinks that he/she alone has the entire Truth, and that everyone else is an agent of falsehood—this is the basis for religious extremism,

persecution, and violence. What is required today is what Dr. Menachem Kellner calls “theological humility.” Yes, we know we have the truth; but we also must be humble enough to realize that other people see things differently from us, and that they have a right to do so. We need to be able to make room for those with whom we disagree.

Below is an excerpt of a paper I delivered at a conference dealing with religious tolerance and mutual respect. It reflects a religious worldview very different from that of Rabbi Amar and so many others of his ilk.

I was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, as were both of my parents. My grandparents had come to Seattle early in the 20th century from towns in Turkey. My ancestors had lived in the old Ottoman Empire since the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. Spanish religious intolerance at that time was counter-balanced by Ottoman religious tolerance.

In Seattle, Jews were a tiny minority of the general population. Sephardic Jews — who had come to Seattle from Turkey and Rhodes — were a relatively small minority within the city’s Jewish population. My grandparents, like the other Sephardic immigrants, spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue. I thought it was perfectly natural and normal to grow up in Seattle with Turkish-born grandparents who spoke a medieval form of Spanish!

Aside from being part of a small minority of Sephardic Jews in Seattle, our family also was religiously traditional and most closely identified with Orthodox Judaism. Orthodoxy is a small minority among American Jews, consisting of perhaps 10% of American Jewry. Although I was a member of an extraordinarily minute segment of humanity, I learned to love my family’s traditions. I eventually became an Orthodox Sephardic rabbi, and an author of many works relating to Sephardic and Orthodox Jewish law, history, and worldview. Indeed, my life has been based on the truth and vitality of my religious beliefs and traditions.

I strive to live according to the truth of my faith. Yet, I also am struck by a massive reality: I am part of a Sephardic Orthodox Jewish community that represents an infinitesimal percentage of humanity. There are at least seven billion other human beings who live according to their faiths, and who know little or nothing about mine. If I have the true way of life — one for which I am willing to live and die — how am I to relate to the overwhelming majority of human beings who do not share my faith?

Growing up as an Orthodox Sephardic Jew in Seattle, I learned very early in life that I had to be very strong in my faith and traditions in order to avoid being swallowed up by the overwhelming majority cultures. I also learned the importance of theological humility. It simply would make no sense to claim that I had God's entire Truth and that seven billion human beings were living in spiritual darkness. I surely believed — and do believe — that I have a profound religious truth that guides my life. But I also believed — and do believe — that all human beings have equal access to God, since God has created each one of us in God's image.

Some years ago, I read a parable (in the writings of Dr. Pinchas Polonsky) that helped me clarify my thinking. Imagine that you have carefully studied a painting day after day, year after year. You know every brush-stroke, color, shadow… you know every detail of the painting and you understand it to the extent humanly possible. And then, one day someone comes along and turns on the light. You then realize that the painting you had studied to perfection is actually part of a much larger canvas. As you stand back, you realize that you need to re-evaluate your thinking. The segment of the canvas that you have studied all these years has not changed; you still know every detail; it is still absolutely true. Yet, you must now study your truth in context of a much larger canvas.

Each faith, at its best, has a very true understanding of its piece of the larger canvas. But when the lights go on, each faith must come to realize that it represents part of the picture but not the whole picture. A grand religious vision must necessarily entail a grand perception of God: God is great enough to create and love all human beings. God sees the whole canvas of humanity in its fullness.

One of the great challenges facing religions is to see the full picture, not just our particular segment of it. While being fully committed to our faiths, we also need to make room for others. We need, in a sense, to see humanity from the perspective of God, to see the entire canvas not just individual segments of it.

Religious vision is faulty when it sees one, and only one, way to God. Religious vision is faulty when it promotes forced conversions, discrimination against "infidels," violence and murder of those holding different views. How very tragic it is that much of the anti-religious persecution that takes place in our world is perpetrated by people who claim to be religious, who claim to be serving the glory of God.

While religion today should be the strongest force for a united, compassionate and tolerant humanity, it often appears in quite different garb. Religion is too

often identified with terrorism, extremism, superstition, exploitation…and hypocrisy. People commit the most heinous crimes…and do so while claiming to be acting in the name of God.

Our voice should be one of mutual understanding; we should remind ourselves and our fellow religionists that God loves all human beings and wants all human beings to be blessed with happy and good lives. There is room for all of us on this earth. We need to foster a religious vision that is humble, thoughtful, and appreciative of the greatness of God.