

Can Religion Be Redeemed? 3/7 Deadly Sins
The Sin of Wrath: Religion and Politics

(Genesis 11:1-9; Proverbs 6:16-19)

If someone asked you to debunk one myth about your religion, what would it be? A group of religious students was recently asked this very question at a Stanford Associated Religions meeting. After identifying the misconception that most troubled them and privately sharing it with a partner of a different tradition, each student was given time to create a logo to counter that myth, and then, to wear it around the room on a t-shirt. Walking around, viewing one another's creativity and sensitivity, there was a striking consensus. With multiple drawings and varied words, with greater and lesser artistic skill but with considerable insistence, Christian students nearly unanimously proclaimed, "Christianity is not equal to Republicanism." "Not all Christians are Republicans."

That these young people felt that this was **the** most important misconception about their religious tradition speaks volumes. Not confusion about the trinity. Not counteracting offensive proselytizing. Not clarifying Christian love. Theology did not trouble these students. Rather, politics perverted their faith. When these students were in middle school, they might have seen a telltale poster. On it, a photograph of an idyllic church covers most of the page. Written across it are the words, "Republicans Believe in America. Vote Republican on November 2." Survey after survey confirms the conflation of Christianity and Republicanism. Religion and politics are now so intertwined that it is an Olympian feat for these young people to wrest back their Christianity from an unholy association, one that caricatures Christianity and dumbs down politics. Sociologist Robert Putnam tells us that young Americans have come to view religion as judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical and too political¹. So these students, the religious remnant, watch with distress as their peers vote with their feet, running as far away from church as possible.

This fusion of politics with religion has not been good for the church. Judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical—these are scarcely the first words you want to come to mind when you think of religion. Whatever happened to faith, hope and charity? Unfortunately, there is a long history of negative

feelings adhering to religion—and a cautionary tale about their implications.

Today is *Tisha B'Av*. It is a day for Jews to mourn and fast, to read the book of Lamentations, commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, as well as several other tragedies that befell the Jewish people throughout history. Lamentations begins, “How the city sits alone.” Jerusalem, crown jewel of religious faith and practice, Jerusalem, literally *Ir Shalom*, the City of Peace, has been ravaged by war. It is destroyed and desolate. The Talmud explains that this destruction came to be because of *sinat chinam*—wanton hatred. The rabbis describe a time where compassion, generosity and civility were buried beneath the weight of hatred and wrath.

A wealthy man wanted to invite his friend, Kamza, to a feast. He sent his messenger, but by mistake, the messenger invited not Kamza, his friend, but Bar Kamza, his enemy. Bar Kamza thought that the invitation was a peace overture. Ready to bury the hatchet, he arrived at the feast. When his host found his enemy at his gates, he grew furious and insisted that his enemy should be sent away. Bar Kamza, wanting to save face, offered to pay for the whole party, if only the host would agree to let him stay for a short while and then leave in dignity. The host refused. He ejected Bar Kamza, a humiliation that was observed—but not prevented—by some of the greatest and most influential Rabbis of that generation. Bar Kamza vowed to get even. He began a series of political maneuvers that eventually led to Caesar of Rome waging war against the Jews and destroying the holy Temple in Jerusalem.ⁱⁱ This is the power of wanton hatred.

Wrath and wonton hatred can easily spin out of control—particularly if those filled with fury are convinced that they are fulfilling a religious mandate. In *Bad Religion: How we have become a nation of heretics*, Ross Douthat, himself a conservative Catholic, calls out the idolatry of Americanism, where love of country has descended into chauvinism and utopianism. We treat our country's Founders not as gifted statesman, but as religious prophets and heroes. We regard the Constitution as “fundamental Scripture”.ⁱⁱⁱ Invoking biblical imagery with abandon, politicians and pundits demand allegiance to American Exceptionalism. They worship at this altar devoid of humility, ignoring the mysteries of providence or the potential for human flaws. It was not always this way. Perhaps the defining image of American Exceptionalism is John Winthrop's evocative “City on a Hill.” But Winthrop summoned this image not to create a national mythology, but rather to demand that this new country live up to its high ideals. Listen to a few more of Winthrop's words:

“Consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill,” he wrote to his daughters, “the eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.” In other words, Winthrop did not intend to pat the Pilgrims on the back; rather, he wanted to awaken their moral vigilance. The image of the city upon a hill is, for Winthrop, a call to preeminent responsibility.^{iv}

President Abraham Lincoln, perhaps our greatest orator of biblical rhetoric in service to American exceptionalism, was acutely attuned to mystery and humility. He described us, borrowing from the Bible, as an “*almost*-chosen people.”^v And in those six letters of qualification, he defends a healthy patriotism, while rebuking the heresy of nationalism.

Douthat charges, when “almost chosen” becomes *actually* chosen; when our Constitution is not just consonant with Christian principles, but literally divinely inspired, the heresy of nationalism has prevailed.

This heresy is a double-headed monster, a roiling mix of Messianism and Apocalypticism. The messianic version searches for a great leader. The apocalyptic version fears a hideous villain. The messianic strain appeals to the better angels of our nature. The apocalyptic strain plays to our fears and paranoias. Messianism attracts idealists; apocalypticism attracts bigots. Messianism turns liberal democracy into a religion unto itself... [it secularizes and historicizes] the story of salvation, transforming the eschatological promises of the New Testament into political promises here on earth. It is Messianism that drives us to war in order to make the world in our image. It is Apocalypticism that proclaims the nearness of our destruction and justifies the demonizing of our leaders.

Some of those leaders herald Citizens United, galvanizing the apocalyptic fears of the left. Others champion the Affordable Care Act, galvanizing the apocalyptic fears of the right. For both sides, danger is imminent. If the world is coming to an end, the appropriate response is to resist, by any means necessary. Whatever might work—lies, character assassination, unlimited personal fortunes to buy elections, all are fair game. After all, if you have to get out of a burning building, you don’t worry about breaking down the door. Apocalyptic fear divides and destroys.

But construction, not only destruction, can be heretical. The story of the Tower of Babel, which we just read, is filled with paradox. The builders, so confident of their mastery, build a tower, intending to reach the heavens, the heights of human achievement; but when God peeks at their work and views the tower, God has to come down, to descend. Despite the efforts of our best builders, we are nowhere near the heavens. The story begins with the ability of all on earth to communicate—and it ends with a babble of languages. The builders declare that they want to make a name for themselves, but at the conclusion of their achievement, they ultimately are unable to understand the names of one another. The builders build to prevent being scattered; but their project results in their dispersion.

Like the excess of Messianism in the heresy of nationalism, the tower builders were filled with hubris. They believed their enterprise was divine. Like the excess of Apocalypticism in the heresy of nationalism, their divisions are unbridgeable, shouting across a great chasm, engendering fear and foreignness, distant from realizing the dream that once animated them.

Neither result is inevitable. Religion and politics can elevate one another; indeed, throughout much of our country's history, they have. Last week, I was privileged to listen as Rabbi Leonard Beerman—a man in his nineties—reflected upon his life and offered wisdom to younger colleagues. He has long been a social activist, building bridges rather than towers throughout a dedicated career. He said,

“...to be in the world means inevitably to enter the realm of controversy... Now I believe, and have always believed, that a religion must be political. A religion divorced from politics is a religion divorced from life, and from people... religion must be political because this world is political, for this world has to do with the decisions we make, the decisions that determine who shall live and who shall die, and how we live and how we die. A religion that does not help us, cajole us, *nudz'ch* us, to confront the moral issues present in all of this, is another anti-depressant, another anti-anxiety medication; it is at best a subordinate amusement... Those who want a religion which blunts the conscience would rob Judaism of what I believe is its moral grandeur.”^{vi}

“Moral grandeur” is a phrase of the philosopher and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He paired it with “spiritual audacity” in a telegram he sent to President Kennedy in June of 1963, when the president invited him and other religious leaders to the White House to discuss the civil rights initiative he had just spoken about. Choosing his words carefully, as telegrams incline us to do, he

nonetheless preached a sermon addressed both to the president and to fellow clergy. “We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church synagogues have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice... I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency...The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”^{vii}

The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. Religion and politics have been woven together to improve both religious traditions and the country that has been shaped by them. Religion and politics can strengthen and challenge one another. They have done so in the past. They can do so again. As we look at our divided country, torn between the fearful and prideful, speaking different languages, watching different news, proclaiming the end is near or only our way is patriotic, praying in different houses of worship—if at all—our hour, too calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. Our hour calls for reaching across a great divide in search of humility and memory. Our hour calls for unpretentiousness in our politics and redemption in our religion. Let us remember, in the halls of Congress, in the Oval Office, in the Supreme Court, in the public square, that being “almost chosen” is a worthy ideal. Let us remember, in our churches, in our synagogues, in our mosques, in our communities, that humility is honorable. The grandeur of our religious traditions and the audacity of our national experiment may even depend upon it.

ⁱ Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How religion divides and unites us*, p. 121.

ⁱⁱ Talmud Gitin 56a.

ⁱⁱⁱ E. J. Dionne, *Our Divided Political Heart*, p. 129.

^{iv} Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How we have become a nation of heretics* p.251.

^v Douthat. P. 254

^{vi} Rabbi Leonard Beerman, talk delivered to Religious Action Center, Rabbi Balfour Brickner Rabbinic Fellows, July 19, 2012

vii <http://jwa.org/media/telegram-from-abraham-joshua-heschel-to-president-john-f-kennedy-june-16-1963>