

Not In My Name

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

More books and articles apologizing for religion, claiming that they are all really peaceful and positive. Only a few are narrow-minded fundamentalists. Only a minority are extremists causing the murder, torture, rape, and brutality carried out in the name of religion. I am finding this a little bit wearisome. The truth is that extremists of all religions are the ones who carry the weight, determine the agenda, and cow the rest into acquiescence or silence.

Here are [some examples](#) I have come across in these past few months of, no doubt, well meaning religious apologists:

"We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanizing force it has been at its best. The sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, the insistence on peaceful modes of resolving conflicts, forgiveness of the injuries of the past and devotion to a future in which all the children of the world can live together in grace and peace."

Indeed we should. But if time and again Abrahamic faiths have failed and are failing to do this, should we not ask why and wonder what has gone wrong or is it an inevitable feature of religion and its preoccupation with power and control?

"We also need to insist on the simplest, moral principle of all: the principle of moral altruism, otherwise known as tit-for-tat. This says: As you behave to others, so will others behave to you. If you seek respect, you must give respect."

Religions of all sorts have fed us slogans like: Love your neighbor, all men are create equal, liberty, equality, fraternity (or the right to happiness) make love not war, give peace a chance, from each according to his ability, to everyone according to his need. We have had hundreds, even thousands of years of all this and where has it got us? More slit throats?

"Fundamentalism—text without context and application without interpretation—is not faith but an aberration of faith."

But when the majority of the committed in your own religion insist on literalism and refuse to reinterpret or use the very means the religion itself allows for rethinking the meaning or modifying it to meet different

circumstances, can we not say that something has gone wrong? Particularly if once in its history it was not so. If the majority refuse to listen to moderate leadership and prefer the extremes, does not this then define the way the religion functions, not the few whistling into the wind?

"We must raise a generation of young Jews, Christians, Muslims and others to know that it is not piety but sacrilege to kill in the name of the God of life."

Yes, we must, but we aren't! Either we are producing fanatics, many who are violent, or religions are being abandoned by a sizable and growing section who think they have nothing significant to offer.

The nonreligious like to blame God. But I prefer to blame human beings. The fact is that humans have this capacity to corrupt almost everything they get involved with, from religion, to politics, to sport.

I have worked in apologetics all my life, trying to emphasize what is good, beautiful, and inspirational in Orthodox Judaism. But in the end I have to admit that the greatest challenge I have had to face has been the behavior and attitude of other Orthodox Jews and their capacity to justify their shortcomings. Whenever I read attacks on religion from well known atheists, so long as they confine themselves to the negative impact of religions, frankly, I agree with them. I part company only on the sad fact that they have no existential knowledge of the beauty and the value of religious experience and life.

The fact is that open-minded, liberal, tolerant religious leaders of most religions have more in common with each other than they do with the the extremists within their own religions. Yet they have been notably incapable of spreading their message across and down in their own constituencies. And what is more they are usually laughed at and dismissed as fly weights by their own religious right wing.

I can make out a very strong case for Judaism as an enlightened, caring, just system (as well as a magnificent and intense spiritual system, with its focus of practice rather than abstract theology). I can select my Biblical and Midrashic sources. I can interpret them in ways that reframe the gender narrative. I can emphasize the moral, caring, humanitarian, and universal aspects of Judaism. But I also know that there is a lot wrong with the way it is practiced, the poor ethical standards of too many of its faithful, and the limitations of much of its leadership. Too often the letter of the law is given priority over human sensitivity and suffering, when one can indeed offer sufficient source material to show how it ought to be the other way round. And the same applies to swathes of Christianity, Islam, and the rest.

I am mightily fed up with those apologists who insist that all is fair in their gardens, that it's only a small minority that gives religion a bad name. It's not religion's fault. But surely it IS, at least to a very significant degree. At some stage it is right to ask whether a religion is

failing if the majority or a large minority are acting in such a way that belies both the religion's stated mission and ethical values.

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Paul Nitze said, "Moral claims are otiose if the antagonist does not share them." Sadly, most religious people do not act as if they share my morals. Religions have a value to remind us of our morality and humanity, that we are supposed to be in the image of God. But it's a poor one, a weak one when both leaders and followers constantly show they are simply not up to the task beyond spouting banalities.

So when I hear yet another articulate religious leader telling us how positive religion is, if only we can get everyone to adhere to its peaceful ideals (when we can't even get our own to behave), I wonder what the real point of grandstanding is other than pompous self-promotion. All the more so when I know that they themselves have often been responsible for a lot of divisiveness and cowardice. I know people will say these things have to be said. And its true they do, but it's the disingenuousness of suggesting or implying that one side it right, that grates.

Meanwhile, too many religious people are behaving badly, carelessly, and cruelly and claiming to act if not in my name then in the name of my religion. Enough hot air. I want to see action or some effective alternative. Otherwise "silence protects wisdom" and to quote another Mishna "words are not essential, actions are."