One Jewish Boy's Perspective on Religion and Inter-Faith Dialogue

Steven A. Levy, MD, FCAP

Editor's Note: The following reflection on the nature of religion was submitted by Dr. Steven Levy, MD, FCAP, a retired physician well-known throughout the medical community in Erie, Pennsylvania, for having served as an instructor in medical ethics at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM). A life-long Jew, Dr. Levy is an active member of Congregation Anshe Hesed in Erie, where, most recently, he led a roundtable discussion entitled "Who's Land is It?" which invited participants to examine the geo-religious origins of the ongoing conflict in the Gaza region of Israel. Levy is a committed supporter of inter-religious dialogue who, as he argues here, sees the world's various faith traditions as "tools" or "pathways" enabling humankind to attain union with its divine creator. Regular readers of Emmanuel Magazine may appreciate the degree to which Levy's characterization mirrors that of the late Pope Francis (pontificate, 2013-25), who, during a 2024 visit to Singapore, compared religions to "languages" employed by differing cultures to speak of a God who is one. Individual men and women—and the cultures to which they belong—may exhibit differences between themselves, the pope stressed in his Singapore remarks, "[but] God is God for all." "And if God is God for all," Francis concluded, "we are all sons and daughters of God." MED

I am Jewish and have Christian friends who worry about the state of my soul. Their hearts are in the right place. Precisely because I am a Jew, however, some are fearful that I may not gain heavenly salvation. One is introspective enough to be conflicted by certain aspects of the religious instruction he received as a child. "Why is it," he asks himself, that "Steve Levy"—a 'good man' by his estimation—"must suffer eternal estrangement from God for not having accepted Jesus Christ as his savior?"

It's true that, as a Jew, I have not embraced Jesus as the source of humanity's salvation. Neither have I experienced any of the rites my friend's church espouses as necessary for redemption. I have never been baptized and do not seek routine intimacy with Jesus through any sort of communal meal. Over the years, however, with the help of my wife—who happens to be a Lutheran—I've gained perspective on various religious traditions. By reading the Gospels, for example, I've become acquainted with many of the valuable lessons that are attributed to Jesus. Love God and neighbor. Who could argue with the wisdom of such a statement?

My favorite of these comes from Luke 12:48, where Jesus tells his followers: "Of those to whom much is given, much will be expected." Is it possible to agree with the teachings of this ancient rabbi while not worrying too much about whether Mary was actually a virgin or whether the Resurrection was a historical event?

I suppose the answer comes down to how one defines the purpose of religion. To my own mind, it is a tool we humans employ to explore the unknown. Religion leads people to God—and because there are numerous religions throughout the world, we must assume that there are as many ways of finding one's path from earthly experience to the divine. A Catholic religious sister with whom I used to teach medical ethics to young doctors-in-training puts it this way: "[There is] one God, many pathways."

Like science, which is the basis of my work as a physician, religion is useful when it functions as a force for good. One could argue that the world would be a better place if

everyone believed this. Too often, unfortunately, people use religion as a way of beating each other over the head. History is replete with examples of how religion divides cultures from each other rather than uniting them.

> ***Religion leads people to God—and because there are numerous religions throughout the world, we must assume that there are as many ways of finding one's path from earthly experience to the divine.***

Broadly speaking, the Bible offers humanity three gifts. It gives us a *moral code*. It provides us with *rituals* by which to organize our lives. And it is full of parables, miracle stories and customs that can guide us through life's difficulties. In my opinion, the greatest of these is the first, a system of morality that helps us discern right from wrong. Loving one's neighbor, for example, is so important a virtue that it is mentioned multiple times in ancient Jewish literature, including the Torah. In the course of his public ministry, of course, Jesus is recorded in Christian Scripture as having stressed the importance of this commandment.

Biblical accounts of miracles, too, can enrich the lives of people and strengthen their trust in the divine. How could Jesus have arisen from death on the Third Day, after all, Christians are led to wonder, if there were no God to have brought this about? Similar revelation can come to Jews, for example, when reading in Exodus about the first

Passover. One could argue that the series of somewhat dramatic plagues God uses to force Israel's release from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 7-12) is not the main focus of this story. Rather, the Passover tale exists primarily to affirm readers' belief in a God who wishes to free them from multiple types of bondage. An enslaved people cannot worship its own God and in its own way.

My sense is that the rituals and traditions bound up in religion are intended to reinforce various moral codes considered beneficial to humankind. This is not to say that throughout the history there have not been instances when both the ritualizing and regulatory functions of religion have been corrupted. When such is the case, religion becomes destructive of its own ends. Over one thousand years ago, the Jewish scholar known as "Rashi" (1040–1105) suggested that we must not treat the Bible as we would a common book of history. It is, instead, a compilation of books about men and women who have lived in ways that either please or displease God.

Some insist that religious behavior represents a threat to humankind for the way it so easily instigates rivalries and acts of violence between individuals and peoples with opposing worldviews. In my opinion, however, it is not religion that threatens our world so much as humanity's deep-seated compulsion to pit one creed against another. In the end, religion may be likened to a tool. If one selects a tool to construct a house, it has been put to good use. If one uses it to harm another or steal their property, it has contributed

to the doing of evil. In either case, it is not the tool that ultimately bears responsibility for doing good or ill but its user.

> ***Like science, which is the basis of my work as a physician, religion is useful when it functions as a force for good. One could argue that the world would be a better place if everyone believed this.***

The monotheism embraced by the world's three, great Abrahamic traditions may be said to contribute greatly to the cohesion of modern society, as it identifies characteristics of a divine Creator that Jews, Christians and Muslims alike can agree upon. For practitioners of any of these religions, God may be imagined as infinite, transcendent and intrinsically good/benevolent. At the same time, the Jew, the Christian and the Muslim are tempted to encapsulate God in religion-specific language that can be sources of friction between them.

The spiritual writer and promoter of alternative medicine, Depok Chopra (b. 1946), suggests that it is precisely when religions affix too narrow a label to the objects of their actions that they err most grievously. One of the forces working against monotheism as we understand it today, in fact, may well be the way in which the so-called "Desert Religions," maintain three names for their Gods. Jews are comfortable with "Adonai," which simply means "ruler." Christians speak of Jesus as "Emmanuel," "God with us."

Muslims, address their God as "Allah." Can it even be said that we worship the same divinity?

Ultimately, the practice of religion is a very personal matter. Few people possess precisely the same concepts of the transcendent in their hearts, and even fewer in their heads. The beliefs we maintain are shaped by idiosyncrasies and cultural biases we may not even share with those who otherwise seem to belong to the same "family of faith" we call our own. I believe, however, that there is one God with whom all people of goodwill strive to be united. This is the basis of my commitment to inter-faith dialogue, along with my conviction that the ultimate goal of the human soul (God) and the multiple pathways that lead to God (religions) are separate realities.

Readers may reach editor Michael E. DeSanctis at editor@blessedsacrament.com and by mail at *Emmanuel Magazine*, Editorial Office, 220 Seminole Dr., Erie, PA, 16505.