

## Religion and World Order 1994 Symposium

### A Jewish Response

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Rabbi Marc Gopin is the founder of Hesed International, dedicated to international poverty relief and Jewish values, and Assistant Director of the Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values. He has also worked extensively on conflict resolution between Arabs and Jews.

The ideas that I bring to you are about religion in general; my examples may be Jewish.

I believe that the major religions of the world need to recognize the dual role of religion in history. Religion has clearly been involved in some of the most dastardly deeds of history, in terms of warfare and violence. At the same time, it has promoted, in various ways, laws and cultural commitments that include the most celebrated values: compassion, love of strangers, suppression of unbridled ego and acquisitiveness, commitment to laws governing property, unilateral gestures of forgiveness, humility, acceptance of responsibility for past errors, drive for social justice, capacity to change through repentance, even the capacity to feel love for an enemy. These are all very powerful notions that go hand in hand with the unfortunate history of institutions that have been involved in violence. In many ways, each religion needs to take responsibility and ownership over that dual character, investigate it, and see how we can redemptively move that legacy into humane global governance, but with the honesty which that kind of investigation entails.

For example, in the Jewish tradition it is a very clear that there is a stark difference between the prophetic commitment to social justice and compassion and, say, the extermination laws in Deuteronomy. Any honest assessment of the system has to include both phenomena, and move beyond them towards a contemporary analysis of how to have this legacy move into a redemptive mission.

I believe also that each religion should be challenged to construct a conflict-resolution methodology that emanates out of its private theological system but evolves into universal shared actions. In other words, each religious human being should have the opportunity to receive this from his/her authentic sources and deeply personal faith moments, but the

actions would be shared universally with others.

I believe that each religion should be challenged to develop its own international strategies for the empowerment of the poor, and out of this develop a common set of actions. One of the fundamental questions that I, along with many others, have struggled with, and I think a lot of us have trouble with, is a theology of the Other -- the Other who fundamentally is not and will never be a part of one's religious system. The question is how one spiritually relates and makes space in the world for the utterly other. In the Biblical discourse there is a prohibition 36 times against oppressing the stranger. It is the most frequently mentioned prohibition in the Bible -- the Bible shared by three major faiths. A "Ger" (the word in the Bible for stranger) theology will be a theology of compassion for those who fundamentally are not part of one's total ritual and faith system.

I have some other ideas that are a little more radical. I suggest sacralizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What I mean by this is to analyze some of the universal documents that have been written in admittedly secular concepts, and to perceive their spiritual and religious roots, and to seek out the language of those documents that can then be translated into counterparts in one's religious experience.

In Jewish texts, for example, the word "right" is not really appropriate; instead there are obligations and prohibitions. However, as you look down the list of universal human rights for each right a counterpart can be found in Jewish law -- e.g. an obligation to affirm somebody's dignity, or a prohibition against embarrassing or humiliating another. So too in terms of the right to fair housing. And you can go on and on identifying the different ways in which the rights have clear counterparts in Jewish life and law. I suggest that we need to think about embracing the secular as it is expressed in the great human rights documents as a religious experience.

Finally, I want to mention moving slowly, but steadily and firmly, from a growth-economy consciousness to a selective-growth economy, that is one based on a sacralizing of how one spends one's money and on what products. Who made the products we use and under what circumstances? Religious people of the world would start considering whether the wood on their tables comes from a decent place or a place that has been raped of all of its resources and its indigenous people left to die. That is the power that each and every religious person has -- to examine how he/she relates to the world economically, and then to sacralize the experience, subject it to the highest spiritual values of his or her belief system.

These are some of the things that as a global religious community we will want to think about.