

RELIGION IN A FREE SOCIETY*

by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

I

Little does contemporary religion ask of man. It is ready to offer comfort; it has no courage to challenge. It is ready to offer edification; it has no courage to break the idols, to shatter callousness. The trouble is that religion has become "religion"—institution, dogma, ritual. It is no longer an event. Its acceptance involves neither risk nor strain.

There is no substitute for faith, no alternative for revelation, no surrogate for commitment. We define self-reliance and call it faith, shrewdness and call it wisdom, anthropology and call it ethics, literature and call it Bible, inner security and call it religion, conscience and call it God. However, nothing counterfeit can endure forever. Theories may intensify oblivion, yet there is a spirit in history to remind us.

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.

The primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer, to develop a degree of sensitivity to the ultimate questions which its ideas and acts are trying to answer.

Our theme is religion and its relation to the free society. Such a relation can be established only if we succeed in rediscovering the intellectual relevance or the Bible.

The most serious obstacle which modern men encounter in entering discussion about the ideas of the Bible, is the absence from man's consciousness of the problems to which the Bible refers.

The Bible is an answer to the question, What does God require of man? But to modern man, this question is suppressed by another one, namely, What does man demand of God? Modern man continues to ponder: What will I get out of life? What escapes his attention is the fundamental, yet often forgotten question, What will life get out of me?

* Excerpted and quoted from *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959, 1960, 1963, 1964, 1966), pp.1-23.

Absorbed in the struggle for the emancipation of the individual we have concentrated our attention upon the idea of human rights and overlooked the importance of human obligations. More and more the sense of commitment, which is so essential a component of human existence, was lost in the melting pot of conceit and sophistication.

Oblivious to the fact of his receiving infinitely more than he is able to return, man began to consider his self as the only end. Caring only for his needs rather than for his being needed, he is hardly able to realize that rights are anything more than legalized interests.

Needs are looked upon today as if they were holy, as if they contained the totality of existence. Needs are our gods, and we toil and spare no effort to gratify them. Suppression of a desire is considered a sacrilege that must inevitably avenge itself in the form of some mental disorder.

We cannot make our judgments, decisions, and directions for action dependent upon our needs.

How are we going to discern authentic from fictitious needs, necessities from make-believes? While it is true that there are interests which all men have in common, most of our private and national interests, as asserted in daily living, divide and antagonize rather than unite us. In fact, the interest in universal welfare is usually blocked by the interest in private welfare. It is just because the power of interests is tyrannizing our lives, determining our views and actions, that we lose sight of the values that count most.

In the tragic confusion of interests, in which every one of us is caught, no distinction seems to be as indispensable as the distinction between right and wrong interests. Yet the concepts of right and wrong, to be standards in our dealing with interests, cannot themselves be interests.

We can ill afford to set up needs, an unknown, variable, vacillating, and eventually degrading factor, as a universal standard, as a supreme, abiding rule or pattern for living.

This, indeed, is the purpose of our religious traditions: to keep alive the higher Yes as well as the power of man to say, "Here I am"; to teach our minds to understand the true demand and to teach our conscience to be present.

Religion has adjusted itself to the modern temper by proclaiming that it too is a satisfaction of a need. This conception, which is surely diametrically opposed to the prophetic attitude, has richly contributed to the misunderstanding and sterilization of religious thinking.

We must beware of converting needs into ends, interests into norms. The task is precisely the opposite: it is to convert ends into needs, to convert the divine commandment into a human concern.

Religion is not a way of satisfying needs. It is an answer to the question: Who needs man? It is an awareness of being needed, of man being a need of God.

It is an inherent weakness of religion not to take offense at the segregation of God, to forget that the true sanctuary has no walls. Religion has

suffered from the tendency to become an end in itself, to seclude the holy, to become parochial, self-indulgent, self-seeking; as if the task were not to ennoble human nature but to enhance the power and beauty of its institutions or to enlarge the body of doctrines. It has often done more to canonize prejudices than to wrestle for truth; to petrify the sacred than to sanctify the secular. Yet the task of religion is to challenge the stabilization of values.

Religion is not for religion's sake but for God's sake.

II

The mind of the prophets was not religion-centered.

The sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that filled the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as a typical ingredient of social dynamics. A single act of injustice to us it is slight, to the prophet it is a disaster.

Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysterical. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely get indignant or overly excited.

But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the deep callousness to evil which the prophet bewails?

The niggardliness of our moral comprehension, the capacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures, is a fact which no subterfuge can elude.

As a free being the Jew must accept an enormous responsibility. The first thing a Jew is told is: You can't let yourself go; get into harness, carry the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Judaism is forever engaged in a bitter battle against man's deeply rooted belief in fatalism and its ensuing inertia in social, moral, and spiritual conditions. Abraham started in rebellion against his father and the gods of his time. His great distinction was not in being loyal and conforming, but in defying and initiating. He was loved by the Lord not for ancestral worship but because he taught his descendants to "keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right" (Genesis 18:19).

III

We all share a supreme devotion to the hard-won freedoms of the American people. The danger begins when freedom is thought to consist in the fact that "I can act as I desire."

Freedom is the liberation from the tyranny of the self-centered ego. It comes about in moments of transcending the self as an act of spiritual ecstasy, of stepping out of the confining framework of routine reflexive concern. Freedom presupposes *the capacity for sacrifice*.

As the object of divine transitive concern *man is*; knowing himself to be the object of divine concern and responding through acts of his own transitive concern *he is free*.

The meaning of freedom is not exhausted by deliberation, decision, and responsibility, although it must include all this. The meaning of freedom presupposes an openness to transcendence, and man has to be *responsive* before he can become *responsible*.

Freedom can only endure as a vision, and loyalty to it is an act of faith.

We must grow in awe in order to reach faith. Awe is the “beginning and gateway of faith, the first precept of all, and upon it the whole world is established.”

Education for reverence, the development of a sense of awe and mystery, is a prerequisite for the preservation of freedom.

We must learn how to bridle the outrageous presumption of modern man, to cultivate a sense of wonder and reverence, to develop an awareness that something is asked of man. Freedom is a burden that God has thrust upon man. Freedom is something we are responsible for. If we succeed, we will help in the redemption of the world; if we fail, we may be crushed by its abuse.

Tragic is the role of religion in contemporary society. The world is waiting to hear the Voice, and those who are called upon to utter the word are confused and weak in faith.

The most fatal trap into which religious thinking may fall is *the equation of faith with expediency*.

God's voice may sound feeble to our conscience. Yet there is a divine cunning in history which seems to prove that the wages of absolute expediency is disaster.

Surely God will always receive a surprise of a handful of fools—who do not fail. There will always remain a spiritual underground where a few brave minds continue to fight. Yet our concern is not how to worship in the catacombs but rather how to remain human in the skyscrapers.