

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can religious 'God manipulation' allow us to do what is evil?

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Last week's column asked the question whether God intoxication can prevent one from doing what is right. Can one be so enraptured by religious experience that the needs of the world are ignored?



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Another theme explored in Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman's recent book, "Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself," is what he calls "God Manipulation." This is when religion can be "manipulated in a way that quiets the voices of moral conscience, draping self-interest in a cloak of pious devotion and stripping

those defined as "other" of moral status."

In God intoxication, we ignore the needs of others, while in God manipulation, our self-interest and self-confidence lead us to do evil in the name of God.

The history of religious violence is the history of thinking my religion, my tribe, possesses absolute truth and I can act with complete confidence that I am right and all others are wrong. It leads to the thinking that those who do not believe as I do, or worship as I do, must not know the God I know.

If my religion is what makes me fully human, then someone of a different religion must not be fully human. And if the "other" is less than human, I have the right to persecute them, even to the point of killing.

That was the logic behind the

inquisition and the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th and 17th centuries, which led to the death of more than 10 million people. It is what led to the Holocaust and other acts of genocide. It is part of the desensitizing of soldiers to let them see the enemy as less than human and, thus, permissible to kill.

IDEOLOGY OF ISIS

It also is what we see in many parts of the world where ISIS and other terrorist groups believe anyone different from them deserves to die. They killed dozens in Paris, San Bernardino and Brussels. They also have killed tens of thousands of Muslims who do not subscribe to their violent version of Islam. They have driven out hundreds of thousands of refugees who

want nothing to do with this kind of violent ideology.

We see it in political rhetoric that says all refugees, fleeing the violence of war, must be prevented from entering our country, even while the statistics show there is a significantly lower rate of crime among immigrants and refugees than among the native-born Americans.

God manipulation is when we put ourselves in the place of God in carrying out what we think God wants, when more often it is only our self-interest at stake.

Hartman said humility is the antidote for God manipulation. Who are we to say what God's ultimate plan is? Who are we to act in ways that are morally wrong just because we think we know what God wants? He stresses the moral basis for all religion. Noah and Abraham

were judged to do what was right and just long before there were religious rituals and doctrines or even the law and scripture.

When the great rabbi Hillel was asked to summarize the Torah, he did not quote scripture or the law, but appealed to a basic moral principle: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others." This "Golden Rule" is at the base of all religious practice and is a powerful constraint on the temptation to manipulate our self-interest by claiming it is God's command.

If you want a scriptural passage that makes the same point, you can't go wrong with what the prophet Micah said: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and love goodness and walk humbly before God."