

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Religion can prevent us from doing what is ethical



Douglas Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

Can religion actually contribute to unethical behavior?

This is the theme of the book by Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, "Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself." It explores the provocative theme of how religion can be the source of violence and other unethical acts. Hartman is the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and frequent speaker at our dialogues in Grand Rapids. He returned last month for the symposium in honor of one of our founders, Richard Kaufman. Our interfaith book group, which is open to the public, will begin discussion of Hartman's book on June 18.

"The human religious desire to live in relationship with God often distracts religions' adherents from their traditions' core moral truths," Hartman writes. "We have seen religion arise as a central force in world politics and frequent instigator of global conflict. ... The failure of religion to produce individuals and societies that champion the values advocated in them is both puzzling and deeply unsettling. Even more troubling is that often religious faith itself is the catalyst that emboldens individuals and governments to murder, maim, harm and control others in the service of 'their' God."

Hartman identifies two features of how religious devotion can lead to unethical behavior. The first he calls "God Intoxication." This happens when in our desire to experience God fully we fail to see the needs of others and our ethical responsibilities to them.

The three religious traditions all look back to Abraham as the father of their faith traditions. Abraham is chosen by God "so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." (Genesis 18:19) This was 500 years before Moses received the law and more than 2,000 years before Christianity and Islam. The ethical principle is recognized by God and precedes religious law, ritual and doctrine.

Hartman tells the story of a Hasidic master who was walking along a cobbled street in Eastern Europe and hears the cry of a baby.

He sees it is coming from his student's house, so he rushes in and sees his student enraptured in prayer.

The rabbi walks over to the baby, takes her into his arms, sits down and rocks her to sleep. When the student emerges from his prayers, he is shocked and embarrassed to find his master in his house, holding his baby.

"Master" he says, "what are you doing? Why are you here?" The Master responds: "I was walking in the street when I heard crying, so I followed it and found her alone." The student says, "I was so engrossed in my prayers that I did not hear her," to which the Master replies, "My dear student, if praying makes you deaf to the cries of a child, there is something wrong with your prayers."

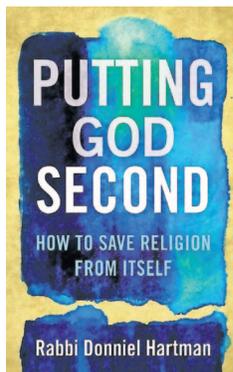
God Intoxication can blind us to the needs of all of humanity.

The second feature in religion that Hartman identifies as potentially leading to unethical acts, he calls "God Manipulation."

This is when religion is "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 the first case of God intoxication, we ignore the needs of others, while in the case of 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 that my religion, my tribe, possesses absolute truth and that I can act with complete confidence that I am right and all others are wrong.



"Putting God Second" is a book by Rabbi Donniel Hartman. Submitted by Douglas Kindschi

IF YOU GO

What: Interfaith Book Discussion

When: 3-4:30 p.m., alternate Tuesdays, beginning June 18

Where: 3001 Seidman Center, GVSU, 50 Front Ave. SW, Grand Rapids

Information and parking pass: interfaith-understanding.org

It leads to the thinking that those who do not believe as I do, or worship as I do, must not know the God that 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, then I have the right to persecute them even to the point of killing.

This was the logic behind the Inquisition and the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th and 17th centuries, which led to the deaths of over 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.

Hartman says that 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 own 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 Hebrew prophet Micah said: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? Only to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before God." (Micah 6:8)

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