

TR-1554 Transcription

CBS News, "The World of Religion," ca. 1975.

Jerry Landay:

Eruptions of violence on the American scene have long been a major concern of social critics, as well as the body politic. The recent attempts on the life of President Ford have heightened the concern that violence throughout history, a way of death in many cultures, has now become a way of life in ours. I talked with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, National Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee, about the role and influence of religion, or as some believe, their lack, in this presumed age of violence. Rabbi Tanenbaum addressed himself to that same issue in Hamburg, West Germany, last June, when he presented a paper before the International Conference of Christians and Jews. The paper dealt with the Nazi Holocaust. Tanenbaum believes that godlessness is the automatic precondition for lawlessness. And he provided some historical perspective.

Marc Tanenbaum:

At the time of the founding of our nation, the early Puritan commonwealth, which was the incipient society of America, there was a profound interrelationship between religious forces and

civic forces in society. In fact, civic officials were chosen, only on the basis of their commitment to goodness, to righteousness, to service to the entire society. With the breakdown of the interrelationship of religion, morality and the civic order, a secularization has taken place into the society. And I think that has undercut a broad commitment to moral responsibility. Beyond that, I think we have to face the fact that, for centuries, certain forms of religious traditions in America and elsewhere have preached a version that one has direct communion with God. It's a matter of personal conscience. And at the same time, has tended to wipe out any respect for law. In fact, one of the great tragic conflicts between Judaism and Christianity was the false polemic that emerged, which said that Christianity was a religion of love, and that one simply had to express love to be a faithful person, while Judaism was a religion of law. Law was made a dirty word. And in time, with the secularization process, and a powerful tradition, which became an anti-law tradition, respect for the law and the secular order collapsed. And I think we are paying the price today for the notion that one can indulge oneself in the most permissive ways, and one has no obligation to law. First religious law, and now civic law.

Jerry Landay:

Rabbi Tanenbaum told me he strongly believes that the contemporary phenomenon of dehumanization in a society of large institutions and large organizations is the soil from which modern violence springs.

Marc Tanenbaum:

I saw an interview not too long ago with a young member of a gang in the South Bronx, who had just killed somebody. He was being interviewed by a policeman. And there was no emotion, no affect. He simply had done something, either to get some money, but the person simply existed as an object for his desire. That dehumanization, which is widespread, and which is fed by a secularization, which has no place for moral or spiritual values, undermines, really, appreciation of the preciousness of the human personality. That's endemic in the world today. And therefore, it is not only a civic crisis, it's a religious crisis. Because at the heart of the religious belief system, if Judaism and Christianity stand for anything at all, in the history of the religions, it is the belief in the sanctity of the human personality. There is very little feeling of the sacred today, and much less feeling for the sanctity of the human personality. Therefore, human beings have become objects. Manipulable objects, to be used in large systems, large machines, and that spills over to the underworld, as well.

People are there as targets to be used for robbery, for rape, for whatever one's own personal aggressive impulses call for. So, in a sense, what this has led me to feel is that if there is going to be any possibility of trying to retain some measure of civilization, of civility in the contemporary situation, it is going to call for a joining together of hands, on the part of the best minds and the greatest leadership in Judaism and Christianity; Islam, for that matter; and other religious traditions, to create a movement of a new Humanism; to reassert the centrality of the human personality in the scheme of things that people are subjects. They're not objects. And then to try to set about creating the kinds of measures that will contain the use of guns and nuclear weaponry and the vast arms proliferation, so that these investments that are made in the manufacture of arms and weaponry are contained and then are translated for human purposes.

Jerry Landay:

Since big government or big statism is one of the results of this bureaucracy, which you describe as dehumanized and secularized, how does an individual relate to this, and what is the effect of the process we've been talking about on the state?

Marc Tanenbaum:

There have been a number of theologians -- moral theologians -- who have reflected on this, and certainly one aspect of it is to find ways for people of conscience and ethical concern to participate in the systems; to enter into the decision-making process of these systems, and to seek to humanize them as much as possible. We see an aspect of that concern, for example, reflected in a movement on the part of religious groups to confront large, multi-national corporations with their moral responsibility today. To use their enormous power and wealth to serve human purposes, not simply to make more profit. They've had some impact in some situations. It's affected attitudes toward blacks in South Africa, for example. It's begun to affect the attitudes toward our boycott toward Israel and discrimination against Jews. Much more of that kind of thing has to take place. People ask me whether religion can be relevant. My God, religion better be relevant, or I don't know who else will be relevant to these great moral and human crises of our time.

Jerry Landay:

Well, I wonder if religion, in a sense, is one of these institutions we've been talking about, hasn't lost its credibility from the time that religions sanctified holy war, in terms of the problem of violence that we're talking about. We

saw -- we read of Joshua razing large cities and putting large cities to the sword. We know of the Christian Crusades, one of the bloodiest events in human history. In Islam, we have the holy war, the Jihad. Hasn't religion lost come credibility in this -- if I can put it this way -- war against violence?

Marc Tanenbaum:

There's no question that that has -- there has been a bloody history, and probably religious conflict has resulted in the loss of more lives than almost any other form of conflict. In fact, today, one of the great tragedies is that on every continent of the earth, there are religious ethnic conflicts, in which religion is being exploited, even raped for political and ideological purposes. One needs to think only of Catholic and Protestants in Ireland, of Christians and Muslims in Lebanon today, of Muslims that are destroying a million black Christian lives in the Sudan. It's all over -- there is not a continent on the Earth that is not being despoiled by this kind of religious ethnic conflict. But one must come back to a fundamental principle, namely that history is not meant to be a hitching post to the past, but a guiding post to the future. People with historic perspective, and deep moral commitments, have an obligation not to allow themselves to be victimized by past events, but seek to create new beginnings. I mean, this is at

the center of the Jewish and Christian belief about atonement and repentance. One must make a confession of wrongdoing in the past, seek to bring about a change, and make a new creation, a new beginning, in creating relationships between people. In addition to that, there's also a political obligation. And that is to say, to stand up against every manifestation of violence, wherever it happens in the world, and to say no to that. I must tell you that I am appalled at the silence of many Christians and liberals in the Western world, at their indifference to what is happening in Ireland. When's the last Christian spokesman who's cried out about what happened in Ireland? When is the last Christian spokesman who's cried out against the destruction of human lives in Lebanon? That's not happening 40 years ago in Nazi Germany, that's happening now. But if you stand by silently, then the people who are engaged in that conflict fear no obligation to be accountable to anybody outside themselves.

Jerry Landay:

Let's relate this drive for the new Humanism to the single listener, the lone parent, the single individual, the single pastor or rabbi, standing before a congregation. What, within his own small cosmos, can he do to begin the process? This is where I think a lot of people feel frustrated and alienated.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Every parent can do something to contribute to a new kind of human community, just as every religious personality can. And that is not to allow a child to be raised in a home in which hatred and prejudice against another person is taught. Because that begins the process of dehumanization. We know, out of our studies of Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Jewish textbooks, that for centuries we have sought to teach the superiority of our faith by denigrating, pointing to the inferiority of another faith. That has contributed to the mentality of alienation, and of disrespect for another person. A revolution has taken place, especially since Vatican Council II, in which all of our textbooks have become increasingly purged of these teachings of hatred and prejudice against another community. We have learned not only to respect our own faiths, but to look with respect and admiration for the positive teachings in the faith of another community. And then, in turn, of learning to respect every human being. What that ultimately comes back to is taking seriously the biblical teaching that every human being is created in the image of God. And one expresses that in love, in care, in justice, in dealing honestly with another human being. If you begin to build a society that is based on that kind of compassion and decency and honesty, you lay the groundwork, hopefully, for the containment of the

opposite. Namely, the teaching of hostility and hatred, and ultimately murder and crime.

Jerry Landay:

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, of the American Jewish Committee.

And that's our report for this week. The World of Religion is produced by Elizabeth [Driven?]. I'm Jerry Landay, CBS News.

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