

## EDITOR'S NOTE

# “IT CAN SINK SO LOW AND NO LOWER”: ON FANATICISM AND DOGMA

Calling your adversary a fanatic is often more emotionally satisfying than it is intellectually useful. When you say fanatic, you usually mean extremist but calling him an extremist isn't enough. What makes him an extremist is being extreme compared to you, the moderate. Your target shoots back: forget about extreme: I'm right and you're wrong. Barry Goldwater said that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, meaning that so-called moderates were insufficiently devoted to liberty. The imputation of fanaticism packs more rhetorical power than the accusation of extremism. Calling someone a fanatic strips them of the defense of rightness without extra effort. Once you fix that mad glint in his eye and that imperviously angry or cheerful mask of enthusiasm on his countenance, you've discredited him or her irremediably. That is why neither Goldwater nor anyone else could get away with saying that fanaticism in a good cause is no vice. Unlike extremism, fanaticism is always a vice.

A great deal of energy in the Orthodox community is expended defending ourselves against accusations of fanaticism or out of eagerness to deploy the epithet against those whom we perceive as less moderate than we. Often we are given the impression, or give others the impression, that serious, uncompromising dedication to intellectual principles or norms is indistinguishable from fanaticism, and that lukewarm commitment bordering on indifference is preferable. It is worth diverting a small proportion of our energy to defining more carefully what we mean and what we ought to mean by fanaticism. The results of such an inquiry may be unexpected.

A better concept of fanaticism must take it beyond extremism. That is why I like Santayana's celebrated definition: "Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim." I like it because, instead of equating fanaticism with what its opponents consider immoderate, it identifies an internal absurdity in the target's outlook. An extremist is accused of disproportionate zeal for a cause. The fanatic is guilty of inconsistency. Your fanatic is allowed to justify his actions in line with his own aim, not yours, but he cannot. If he is not hopelessly rigid,

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the putative fanatic may end up pleading guilty to your charge and changing his ways.

For example: a leader quick to undertake major military action to enhance his nation's security is untroubled when branded an extremist by the dovish opposition. From his perspective, they are wrong and he is right: extreme measures to assure survival are no vice. Now if you charge that his policies endanger the security he seeks because they have become an end in themselves and he has forgotten the original goal, in other words, that he fits Santayana's definition and is a fanatic, the epithet may yet bring him up short so that he recalls his original aim and revises his position accordingly. Or the relentless pursuit of health may impel a person to extraordinary lengths in avoiding certain foods. Call him an extremist because a slightly better chance for physical well-being is not worth the sacrifices and preoccupation and he will boast it as a virtue; warn him that he risks nutritional deficiencies, and he may yet see reason and make health rather than dietary rigidity his guiding light.

Of course, Santayana's definition loses effectiveness as a persuasive logical tactic if the target cannot recover the goal or the anti-fanatic is blind to his opponent's motives and reacts only to the redoubled effort. The examples we looked at are easy because the original goals (security, health) were transparent and the only argument was about the fanatic undermining his true goal. As we shall see, goals worth living and dying for are usually not simple, neither at their inception nor with the passage of time.

Those who fail to study Santayana are condemned to repeat him out of context. The fanatics Santayana had in mind when he coined the aphorism were one of his least favorite nations. Here is the full passage:

The after-effects of Hebraism are here contrary to its foundations; for the Jews loved the world so much that they brought themselves, in order to win and enjoy it, to an intense concentration of purpose; but this effort and purpose, which had of course been mythically sanctioned, not only failed of its object, but grew far too absolute and sublime to think its object could ever have been earthly; and the supernatural machinery which was to have secured prosperity, while that still enticed, now had to furnish some worthier object for the passion it had artificially fostered. Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 13.

In other words, Judaism is fanatical, the Harvard savant alleges, because its original aim was the worldly success of the nation, a coherent, reasonable goal, if not a particularly noble one. When the Jews mistook their commitment to God as the goal rather than as a means toward worldliness they became fanatical. Forgetting the aim and redoubling the effort—that's Santayana's definition.

Liking Santayana's definition of fanaticism does not mean that one must subscribe to this application. Perhaps the service of God is a worthier goal than national prosperity, and forsaking exclusive devotion to the latter for absolute commitment to the former is not forgetting one's aim but discovering one's true vocation, just as the mature student outgrows childish attachment to external motives and comes to value learning as its own reward. Whether Judaism is fanaticism or not is inseparable from one's first principles. Santayana's are different from mine.

To determine the pristine goal that the fanatic's redoubled efforts betrays is difficult not only with respect to long-lived religions like Judaism. You can't always be sure about individuals. Take the eminent Santayana himself writing to a younger (Jewish-born!) colleague in the 1930's:

I love order in the sense of organized, harmonious, consecrated living: and for this reason I sympathize with the Soviets and the Fascists and the Catholics, but not at all with the liberals. I should sympathize with the Nazi's too, if their system were, even in theory, founded on reality...<sup>2</sup>

Among the intellectual superstars of his age, Santayana was far from alone in his attraction to the great European dictators of the era, though his taste, as evinced by this passage, was more eclectic than most. Is he fanatical? By one element in his definition, no, since he does not seem prepared to make any effort to realize his dream, let alone a redoubled effort. The other element depends on his fundamental aims: if the great goal is organized, harmonious living, as he avers, then the violence entailed by militant political productions blatantly vitiates the vision; if, as one may suspect on the basis of other features of his thought, Santayana had a soft spot for the charismatic psychopaths because they appealed to his appreciation of beautiful, dramatic ritual, then a more impassioned commitment to any or all of them would merely extend the philosophy to its logical conclusion.

Before looking at our own contemporary situation, let's try another definition of the fanatic. The *OED* quotes the Victorian man of letters

<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of George Santayana, Volume 5, 1933-1936*, ed. Holzberger and Saatkamp (MIT Press, 2003) 195, written June 8, 1934.

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Charles Kingsley who speaks of “[t]he man of one idea, who works at nothing but that... sacrifices everything to that; the fanatic in short.” Kingsley’s fanatic is a specific kind of extremist: he is not defined by how far he goes, but by how narrowly. To know whether a man or woman is a Kingsleyan fanatic, you don’t have to delve into their past and present goals or to judge his effort excessive. It is enough to know that his devotion to the idea that drives him is exclusive and one-sided.

Does Kingsley here intend condemnation? The continuation of his statement is surprisingly positive: “By fanatics, whether military, commercial or religious, and not by ‘liberal-minded men’ at all, has the world’s work been done in all ages.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, its rhetorical force derives from contrast with the conventionally negative connotations of fanaticism. Yes, he implies, we must recognize the achievement of the “man of one idea” without wanting to be like him or live with him. This dual evaluation of the fanatic deserves more attention.

## II

So are we Orthodox Jews fanatics? If the goal to which we dedicate our efforts is the persistence and well-being of the Jewish people then Orthodoxy is to be judged by that standard. Many of our fellow Jews maintain fervently that our insistence on halakhic observance and adherence to normative belief substitutes one means to that end for the end itself. Having misplaced the true goal and intensified its efforts, Orthodoxy, by Santayana’s definition, deserves the label of fanaticism.

Much contemporary debate, accepting Santayana’s assessment of Judaism, follows these lines. Opponents of Orthodoxy wish to play down the importance of observance and abnegate the role of belief in order to promote the “big tent” that will assure numerical success and social, economic, and political welfare. For them Orthodox practice and affirmation are useful as one kind of Jewish engagement in the varied smorgasbord of Jewish identity building. The Orthodox contribution may be recognized as superior insofar as Orthodox affiliation is associated with many other safeguards of Jewish identity such as kashrut, Shabbat observance, supporting Israel, endogamy, and Jewish literacy. Regarded as obligatory,

<sup>3</sup> *Sir Walter Raleigh and His Time* 115. <https://books.google.com/books?id=GsgwAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA115&lpq=PA115&dq=charles+kingsley+%22man+of+one+idea%22&source=bl&ots=p1hojUQcyM&sig=AfbYsV99SvCa6rOmPAaOgFU1hSM&hl=en&csa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiTxbfnrOrRAhXpzIMKHRzmD9MQ6AEIJTAB#v=onepage&q=charles%20kingsley%20%22man%20of%20one%20idea%22&f=false>.

however, Orthodoxy threatens to exclude or marginalize members of the Jewish community. The Orthodox counter that diluting the rigorous standards upheld by Orthodoxy is a short-sighted strategy for survival and soon results in diminished identity. Orthodoxy is thus justified even from the perspective of the ideology that defines the goal of Judaism as communal flourishing and survival.

Both Orthodoxy and social Judaism set down a unitary overriding goal: for the former, the service of God; for the latter, the advancement of the people. Neither, by Santayana's definition, is fanatical provided it is truly faithful to its foundational principle. As we just noted, Orthodoxy may have instrumental value even from the viewpoint of its opponents. Yet, in addition to its absolute claims, Orthodoxy is seriously flawed in the eyes of its detractors for another reason. To be Jewish as Orthodoxy teaches is complicated and it entails the willingness to sacrifice. These factors discourage the average modern person from affiliating and thus hamper survival and "Jewish continuity."

By contrast, the social Jew is proud of the positive affiliations he finds attractive and meaningful. These may include halakhic observance, synagogue membership, prayer, study, and Zionism; it also includes bagels and lox, folk dancing, Yiddish phrases, being opinionated and argumentative, left wing politics and (sometimes) right wing politics. Some of these endeavors are strenuous: they may require significant investment of time and energy or the risk of unpopularity and ostracism; some are light. All are valuable Jewishly for the same reason--the more Jewish things one does, the greater the adhesion to the Jewish people.

Orthodoxy, though, demands commitment to practices, some of them time-consuming and inconvenient, regardless of their appeal to the individual, and to normative beliefs not all of which are the ones we would have chosen on our own. The point here is that Orthodoxy, by definition, is not about expressing one's self; rather it imposes on the individual a truth that is not his or hers. Orthodoxy may serve as a site of self-expression but always of a self that is committed to conforming itself to an ideal that is not yet oneself.

The social Jew is confident that his brand of identity building is free of fanaticism in any sense of the term. His threshold of entry is low, so it doesn't undercut the goal of including as many members as possible. And it seems immune to extremism: binging on Shalom Aleichem or *Seinfeld* or even Phillip Roth are victimless crimes. Few pleasures are more inoffensive in the long or short run than eating herring and indulging in cholent. And so on.

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Sometimes it is forgotten that these harmless hobbies rarely bring about robust Jewish identification sufficient to withstand countervailing influences. That can only be accomplished via the more strident types of identification, the ones that can rival the consuming passions of religion and particularly those that give satisfaction only when the public arena is commandeered on their behalf, when ideals are outwardly projected and their advocates seek to impose their will and judgment on others. As we see every day both in Israel and the United States, the energy thus unleashed is divisive and typically leads to hatred and contempt for those who do not fall in line.

Earlier we said that Santayana's idea of the proper goal of ancient Judaism is not Orthodoxy's and hence his imputation of fanaticism to the Jews is debatable. But the fundamental philosophical divergence may run deeper. The religious goal of serving God is indeed unitary; the unity, however, derives not from the self-defined and self-chosen welfare of the people but from the divine object of our worship and from the expression of His will in the Torah. As such, living an Orthodox life is too complicated an affair to be formulated in terms of a simple goal. The Social Jew can, and often does, attempt to dispense with God in order to worship at the shrine of ethnicity. The traditional Jew cannot emancipate himself from Jewish peoplehood in favor of solitary piety. The militant Zionist may disdain universal moral imperatives and the cosmopolitan may express "Jewishness" through obliviousness to Jewish particularity. Orthodoxy cannot pick and choose in this manner. Absolute devotion to God and Torah entails multiple and irreplaceable finite commitments.

The way of Orthodoxy is therefore one of complex and not always harmonious gestures. One is reminded of Chesterton's image of the tightrope walker who teeters back and forth, now appearing to fall one way, now in the opposite direction like a reeling drunkard, while in fact it is these exorbitant-looking gesticulations that enable him to maintain his balance and to follow the straight and narrow line. It is the principle of dogma, the embracing of a systematic outlook independent of one's own inclinations, however legitimate in themselves, and the consequent foregoing of selective private judgment that is the hallmark of (lower case) orthodoxy and provides the indispensable framework for this demanding balancing act.

You will tell me that the dogmatic principle as I describe it is not a conspicuous feature of the Orthodox lifestyle. Often discussion of dogma and ritual aims at a narrow hairsplitting about optimal formulations and performances as if punctiliousness alone could substitute for balance and

comprehensiveness. Often Orthodoxy becomes a specialized manifestation of social Judaism, lobbying vociferously for one particular subset of Orthodox practice or ideology, concentrating pugnaciously on elements that are neglected or rejected by the non-Orthodox, or ingratiatingly harping on the elements the non-Orthodox approve. Then the Orthodox Jew redoubles his or her commitment to some component value in Orthodoxy such as devotion to the Jewish people and its defense, love of the land of Israel, meticulous observance of certain *mitsvot*, dedication to Torah study or (even among the Orthodox!) cheerleading for non-Jewish or even anti-Jewish ingredients imported from European ideology or American politics that are found attractive by some outspoken members of our social group. But whatever the special talents and inclinations that make the vocation of each Orthodox Jew unique, and in spite of the individual foibles that tempt us to narrowness and self-satisfaction, Orthodoxy, by upholding the painstaking but exhilarating tightrope walk of dogma as a normative and dogmatic system, counteracts Kingsley's description of the fanatic as the man or woman of one idea.

### III

Fifty years after Professor Santayana of Harvard identified Judaism with fanaticism, a young scholar at Harvard studied the desiccation of early 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican religion and blamed it on the sincere but misguided attempts of late 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers to play down the importance of dogma and ritual. After the civil strife of the 1640's and 1650's they hoped that avoiding potentially divisive religious rigor would inhibit what they called "enthusiasm" and we would call emotional fanaticism. They envisioned "Anglican continuity," a unified, peaceful, and orderly Christian society.

On this tendency R. Aharon Lichtenstein commented in the resulting dissertation:

Dogma, ritual, intellection—whatever one may think of them—at least set an objective floor for religion; it can sink so low and no lower.

Telling this story of religious decline, it is unimaginable that the future religious authority was oblivious to its ominous implications for the future of Judaism in general and Orthodoxy in particular. How far can religion sink and in what direction? Sixty years ago and no less so today the danger was abandonment of fervor, a religion reduced to being one

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of the appurtenances of middle class society, where the most upscale members lack conviction and set the tone for those who would emulate them. Dogma and normative ritual could then sustain the bare minimum that would keep religious authenticity alive under discouraging circumstances.

Our present discussion adds another layer. Dogma and normative ritual are not only the line of last defense against the etiolation of religious life. They are also the line of first defense against Judaism sinking, not only to the tepid indifference that R. Lichtenstein discerned in the Anglican establishment of three hundred years ago, but at the very same time to one-sidedness and to the very fanaticism and imbalance occasioned by the overthrow of dogmatic principles and normative action in the name of subjective preference disdainful of the objective floor of dogma. This is a danger within the nominally Orthodox community and an even greater danger among those distant from the orthodox way of thinking.