Crucify the rotted roots of religious bigotry

Highland Views
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Guest columnist

There are some subjects that need to be openly addressed, yet often are not discussed because whatever you say will agitate someone. If this was the standard practice, to not speak up out of concern someone will be upset, none of us would ever write anything substantial or meaningful about religion.

As a secular humanist who is not against religion as a human activity, I'm aware there are people of faith who are uncomfortable with secularism and atheism.

Preconceptions cloud a clear vision of what secular and atheist mean, often because many believers have little or no interaction with nonbelievers who, because they live in a culture dominated by religion, don't talk much about their non-belief. Even using terms like "nonbeliever" and "non-belief" identifies people with something negative, leading some to fear secular people because they appear to threaten faith, as if those who don't believe seek to steal their faith.

As I regularly point out, a loud segment of the religious world holds to something I call fear-based faith. Fearfulness of "the other" is one major root of the bigotry we see between believers and nonbelievers, or toward followers of different faiths.

One troubling subject that secular people can address very directly is bigotry, especially bigotry based on religious beliefs, in part because they experience some of that bigotry. Sometimes observing beliefs and practices from the outside of a tradition can shine the most intense light on the shadows. It's not unusual to see the worst forms of bigotry growing from the rotting roots of certain species of theological trees. The dictionary definition of "bigotry" reveals the serious nature of these roots: "obstinate or unreasonable attachment to a belief, opinion, or faction, in particular prejudice against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular group." Obstinate, unreasonable folks can be found in any faction, and factions can generate fictions like stereotypes.

A reader nudged me to address "the religious roots of antisemitism" – something with a long history fraught with bigotry ("fraught" refers to a ship's cargo – as in the baggage or cargo we carry in our heads). I'm not going to wade into Middle Eastern politics here, however, I do have some opinions about certain kinds of anti-Jewish beliefs and practices. I'm especially concerned with a sizable number of Christians who seek to "love the Jews" right into the kingdom of the Christian God. Many of these believers claim to believe in "biblical principles" they assert are "Judeo-Christian," which usually means "Christian" and particular Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures.

If bigoted means to pre-judge others who are members of another group or faith, simply because they are not your group or your faith, then those who hold such views of Jewish people are bigots. I don't think it's unfair to state these believers are perhaps acting out of an unconscious bigotry, yet it's still bigoted, prejudiced. They judge Jewish people and the religion of Judaism in the same way they self-righteously judge any secular individual or anyone of another faith. The bottom line is always and forever the same: Are you saved? Have you accepted Jesus as savior? If not, Jewish or not, you're lost in sin and will be punished in hell.

In my view, one particularly troubling group is Christians United for Israel. Led by megachurch pastor John Hagee, CUFI funnels a lot of money toward the nation of Israel, and they claim to care for "the Jewish people." Yet, look closer. This evangelical ministry is-....wait for it: evangelical. As a former evangelical who once joined Jews for Jesus, I know what is really going on. As I see it, this isn't very different from some Christians proclaiming "We love LGBTQ people," while their true motivation is salvation and conversion.

Is this bigotry "antisemitic"? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I think for many well-intentioned Christians who genuinely care about Jewish people, they sincerely believe they are helping non-Christians — lost sheep — to enter the fold. Like much bigotry, I think these beliefs fundamentally grow from limited knowledge and experience. Prejudice sprouts from the blighted branches of old, moldy, mossy theologies.

True antisemitism, at least in Christianity, is based on a persistent and pernicious suspicion of the Jewish people deeply rooted in the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, where "The Jews" are constantly harassing Jesus and plot to have him killed by the Romans. The most incredible and inexcusable aspect of Christian antisemitism is that Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian Jew, is transformed into a hero of hatred, as he is torn from his own Jewish roots and branches to be magically and tragically transfigured into the ultimate Bigot God incarnate.

Bigotry must be crucified.

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