

Three Viewpoints on Religion: Rev. Sun Myung Moon, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum and Senator Mark Hatfield

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Rev. Sun Myung Moon

At a recent panel discussion in Washington, D.C., Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum and Senator Mark Hatfield aired their views on the condition of organized religion in America today and replied to questions from the audience. Their comments below are excerpted from that discussion. In addition, The Way of the World selected passages from the speeches of Reverend Sun Myung Moon relevant to the issues discussed.

Rabbi Tanenbaum is the national inter-religious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee. He has been a pioneering leader and thinker in inter-religious relations for nearly 25 years. Mark Hatfield is the Republican Senator from Oregon, serving his second term.

What is the condition of religion in America today?

Rev. Sun Myung Moon: Sincere Christians today pray earnestly and strive to lead a life of faith in order to insure their own salvation. Once their own salvation is secure, then Christians try to save their families. We do not realize that if we really struggled to win our nation under God's will, our families and ourselves would be included in the scope of that salvation. Today Christianity is declining in the world, and this is the cause.

The founding ideology of the United States was Christianity. If the people of the United States would put themselves in the position of Jesus and pray to God, "Let the whole world be saved, even if our nation may have to be sacrificed," the United States would continue to be a great nation. Then this nation, even though it might be faced with disaster, could be resurrected as Jesus was, and would be able to save the whole world.

The mere numbers of the Christian population in America are not impressive. You cannot impress God with numbers, but only with fervent faith. How many Christians in America are really crying out with fervor for God? How many American Christians feel that God's work is their own work? How many people put God first? How many are ready to die for God?

Rabbi Tanenbaum: By the usual American standards of success in the marketplace, religion is by and large, by all external signs, reasonably successful. Despite statistical ups and downs, institutional membership in churches and synagogues rose 46 percent between 1950 and 1970, while the general population growth declined. By 1971, religious groups received more than 40 percent of the total philanthropic giving in our nation. But the criteria for spiritual success is to be looked for elsewhere. Namely, "What difference does it make, to be a Jew or a Christian today, in the kind of world in which we live?" Jews and Christians who are faithful to their shared biblical covenant stake their existence on the central biblical affirmation that each human being is created in the sacred image of God; that human

life is of infinite worth and preciousness; that no human being can be used as an object for someone else's project or program or ideology, or even someone else's revolution.



Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum

My late blessed teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has written, "Judaism has no symbol for God. Neither the synagogue nor the temple is a symbol of God. Neither the sacred Torah scrolls, nor the shofar of a ram's horn, nor the candelabra menorah is a symbol of God. The only symbol of God in the Jewish religion is the human personality. And we experience the divine presence in our midst only through the ways in which we manifest toward one another the divine attributes of justice, of love, of truth, of moral integrity, of caring and compassion."

There are many signs of such reverence for life all about us. The decisive role that religious leaders and groups have played recently, and continue to play, in mobilizing food aid and relief services for millions of starving people in the world -- Guatemala being the latest tragic instance -- these are but some signs. But from such expressions of moral and spiritual health we do not suffer. Rather, from social pathology, from callousness to human beings, from dehumanization, are we threatened. And our spiritual health and very survival depend on our confronting and overcoming such widespread brutalization of the human spirit today.

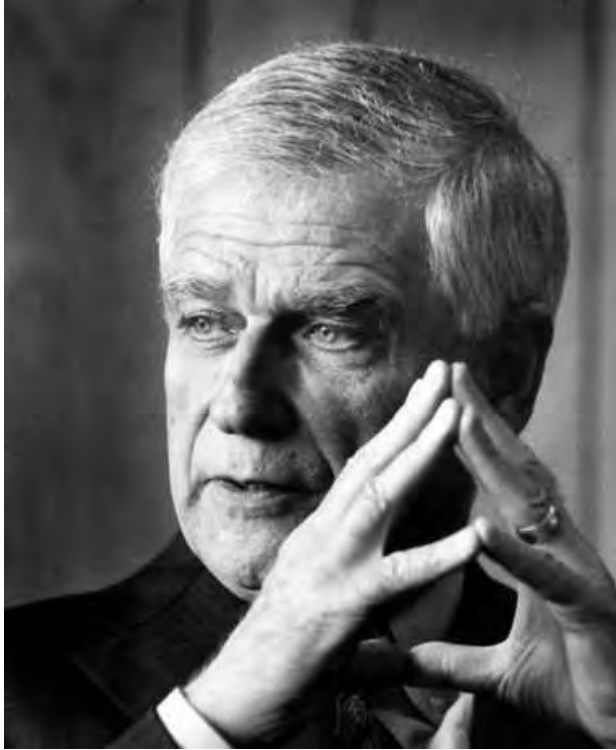
The condition of religion, therefore, the condition of authentic biblical religion, will be judged ultimately in America's third century by the degree to which we take seriously the instruction of such great prophets of Israel as the prophet Isaiah, and translate his vision not into pieties and liturgical codes, but into actual change of human conditions. "Wash you," the prophet said. "Make yourselves clean. Put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow."

Senator Hatfield: If we look at the church as an organization located in a building, we see many indications of declining loyalty to it. Church membership is down, for the first time since records have been kept. Church giving did not keep up with inflation last year. A recent poll showed that the church is 23rd out of 25 in its influence on the lives of Americans as an institution. Onlookers are aware of the divisions within the church over the historical issues of faith and practice and the current issues -- the role of women, abortion, and charismatics.

Christ's view of the church and leadership in it was purposely to avoid putting the emphasis on structure and organization. He spoke in a figurative sense, when he spoke of the church as "the body of believers." He was more concerned about obedience and discipleship, than organizational achievements. He repeatedly resisted the efforts of his followers to struggle for power and position. He said, "The rulers of the world lorded over you, but I am among you as one who serves." The marvelous foot-washing experience was only one of the ways he demonstrated what he meant by "servant leadership."

I believe that any weakness in the impact of the church in society today is probably not a result of doctrinal impurity, or inadequate church growth promotion, but a failure to simply and radically obey the

commands of our Lord!



Senator Mark Hatfield

Rabbi Tanenbaum could recount for us the amazing durability of the Jewish faith during periods of its history, when it was centered amongst hostile cultures. In the Christian faith, as well, much of its strength is to be found among the believers who are a part of the church dispersed. While two thirds of Americans do not attend a church or synagogue regularly, some of them are very much a part of the growing fringe of the spiritual church. For the dispersed church, the church building serves mainly as a place for the believer to meet for training, for fellowship, and to observe the sacraments. The church at its best is where the people are: in ghettos, in the offices of national leaders needing fellowship and encouragement, in prison study groups, and many other places where people are.

How do you resolve the conflict between the challenge to love, but the deceitful hearts of men?

Rev. Moon: People are alienated from the love of God, but if and when they have a deep desire to love God or to be loved by Him, God's love has a magnetic power. That person will inevitably be drawn to God and join the mainstream of the flow of His love. Love is the only element that can draw us to God, and the path of love alone can lead us to reach God.

People throughout the world are learning that God is absolute and perfect, and perfect God demands perfect man as His object. Jesus said, "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:48) He is clearly indicating that our standard of value is the perfection of our Heavenly Father.

All of us want to be perfect. All of us want heaven on earth, but we ask, "How can it be done?" We wonder if it is at all possible for man to be perfect. Some contend, with apparent justification, that all one has to do is merely look at man to see the gross error of such an aspiration. We point to the sin and suffering inherent in all things, even in the things that are most holy. We say, "Only God is perfect." However, when we fully comprehend the design for man in God's concept of creation, we will understand that perfection is within our grasp.

Rabbi Tanenbaum: It is a classic question which is as ancient as not only the prophets of Israel, but as the Bible itself. It is essentially the moral ambiguity of human nature. In Rabbinic tradition, we speak of it as the ongoing conflict between the evil impulse and the good impulse in human beings. Jewish tradition, which has a profound sense of realism about the flawed nature of human beings, who are both creators and creatures, says that the genuine spiritual quest is the struggle of man constantly to contain the evil impulse, and to seek to affirm and strengthen the good impulse, in terms of service and justice to other human beings. We do not accept that a human being is saved, ultimately and for all time, by one act of revelation. Because, if that salvation has taken place in the life of every individual human being already, how can we then explain so much evil, injustice, bloodshed and hatred in the world? But it is our human responsibility, as faithful people, to seek to be present in the world, to struggle against the forces of injustice, and to make manifest God's presence through acts of justice and caring for other human beings, hoping that, at the end of time we will see the signs of the Messianic age, as we say in Jewish tradition, a time in which there will be an end to bloodshed and suffering, there will be fraternity and justice and love. Then we will know that the Messiah has come.

How is the modern adult to come to terms with his religious relevance and enrich others on a day-to-day basis?

Rev. Moon: Up to the present time, people have been inclined to think religious life belonged to some airy plane far above human life, and imagined that God would just sweep them away to heaven with His power. But the way to heaven is to broaden the scope of our love by loving the people in our home, by loving our neighbors, by loving our friends, relatives, clans, nations, and the whole population of the world. God would take delight in living in the home where that kind of love is lived. But He would want to expand that home to ever-broader levels until the whole of mankind could become one huge family under God as our Parent. Because of the fall we lost three loves -- parental love, marital love, and children's love. In bringing them to be centered on God, we must raise all our love to a higher dimension than what we have known on earth up to now. We can raise love above the level of Satan's dominion and back to the original standard and value of love, to the standard that matches God's love. We will find the standard of love in man as the children of God in the perfect love of God, as the married couple in the perfect love of God, and as the parents in the perfect love of God.

Senator Hatfield: I think that one has to, first of all, come to grips with to what his life is committed, to whom his life is committed. If one has committed his life to Christ, one sees Christ as the perfect man, the model man, the person to whom we can look for not only the measurement of perfection, but also the person to whom we can look for energizing our life on a day-to-day basis. I believe, in other words, that one has to seek out his spiritual confrontation and settle that in his own heart and mind. The second part, equally important, is the mission of his faith. We oftentimes verbalize a great deal, but we do little to activate and to affirm our faith through action. I believe in the faith and works concept of Saint Paul and Saint James. Therefore, I would say that one would seek daily, through the indwelling of the Spirit, through spiritual intake (of study, of meditation and of prayer) and by loving justice, doing mercy, and faithfully following God.

Is nationalism a sort of religion in America today?

Rev. Moon: We must understand that America was formed to be the new flag bearer of God's will to move towards world salvation through cooperation between religion and state. America's mission is abundantly clear. It is to fulfill the desire that God has had since the beginning, to make this world one world of God, a world in which His ideal will blossom. It is not by accident that America's founding spirit is described in the motto, "One Nation Under God." This was already destined in the will of God.

I know that if America continues along the present road of apathy and complacency, God may leave America. America must reach out to the world for its salvation; even at the price of sacrificing America herself. America must wake up. Her people must unite and launch the unifying movement of God to achieve the unification of all Christianity and of all religions. Right now there must come a fresh spiritual revolution to ignite a new fervor in Christianity and in national spirit to pursue a higher vision of the world. This must happen in America.

Senator Hatfield: I think we have had a legacy of Constantine for about 1500 years now, that has been a very difficult one to live with. We have had difficulty in delineating between our allegiance to Caesar and our allegiance to God since that time. The church shortly thereafter began to bless the cause of the state, and the state in turn protected the church. I think nationalism and the church have had a long history of going hand-in-hand, the cross and the flag exploiting people in colonial imperial periods, along with scriptural admonition and support. So I think we can say in America today, this is one of our problems, the legacy of Constantine. We frequently cannot delineate between Caesar's demands and God's demands of justice and mercy and love.

If there is a God, how do you know? If God created us, who created God?

Rev. Moon: Every part of your body is delicately made to suit its purpose. How can you say you were created out of nothing? Even in the material world, you have to have a blueprint first. From that we can gather that there is someone who planned the blueprint before the coming of humankind; whenever you wash your face, when you look into the mirror, you feel the wonder of who made you. Even looking at your eyes alone, we know that well before the birth of the eyes there was someone with vast knowledge of natural science including the heavenly bodies, the air, dust, everything existing in the world.

When you observe human society closely, you know that anything material is the product of something invisible and internal. We cannot see our mind, but we know it exists and we know that everything starts from something invisible. When you smile or laugh, is it because your mind is happy or your body? Your laugh is a result of your mind being happy. Everything was created with something invisible as subject and the visible thing as the object, so whenever we see tangible things we can think of their origin as being something invisible. It is a logical and scientific conclusion that God exists.

Rabbi Tanenbaum: Seldom in Jewish history and human history has the question of the existence of

God been more perplexing to the Jewish people than in the wake of the Nazi holocaust. I recall one of my colleagues, a rabbi who immediately after World War II went to the concentration camps in Dachau and Buchenwald and saw the gas chambers and the crematoria into which six million Jewish men, women and children, and millions of other human beings were offered up as human sacrifices. My colleague came back to New York; we sat in a conversation with Roman Catholic and Protestant evangelical friends one night. And in an explosion of honest integrity as he searched his soul he slammed his fist on the table and said, "After Dachau and Auschwitz I cannot believe in a Lord God of history who is a God of compassion and justice. How could there have been compassion and justice when a million Jewish children were thrown up in the air for rifle practice and were shoved into gas chambers?" Martin Buber tried to explain, based on authentic Jewish tradition, that this was a period of the eclipse of God. God had hidden His face from His people. It is a great mystery. And yet we know, in our very flesh, that we are nothing other than animals were it not for the fact that in every human soul there is something more than chemicals, more than material animal nature, and that which is more, is something of the divine. So we are fated, by our destiny, to continue to search for God's presence, to act as if God is present in our lives, to make manifest that which we do know of Him, or Her, as the case may be. We are still hoping that the fuller revelation of God's presence in our lives will come to us at a time when we deserve to have that manifestation in our midst.