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## Dangerous Religious Ideas as Threats to Solidarity: Review of Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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## **Dangerous Religious Ideas as Threats to Solidarity**

***Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Rachel S. Mikva. Boston: Beacon Press, 2020. 255 pages. ISBN 978-0-8070-5187-0 (hardcover); 978-08070-1476-9 (paperback)**

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Rabbi Rachel Mikva's *Dangerous Religious Ideas* is a powerful book about ideas that have power—the power for good and the power to harm. I have read many books that deal with the destructive power of religion. In my judgment, this one is the most helpful of the lot. Three of my many reasons for making this judgment are that Mikva 1) focuses not so much on extremist ideas that most readers would recognize as dangerous but on ideas central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that have been employed not only for good but also in dangerous and even devastating ways; 2) persuasively demonstrates how, along with their core ideas, the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions have transmitted the means by which to safeguard these ideas from being used in harmful ways; and 3) shows that self-critical faith is traditional; that, as indicated by the book's subtitle, it has “deep roots” in each of the traditions she explores. So while many people seem to think that religious self-criticism is a “liberal” versus a “traditionalist” approach to faith, this book makes clear that commitment to our faith traditions requires critical self-examination of the beliefs we espouse.

*Dangerous Religious Ideas* contains a wealth of information and insights that many a seasoned scholar of religion will discover for the first time. But it is also accessible to laypeople, including college students. Mikva is not only an outstanding scholar but also a brilliant teacher. And the teaching she does through this book is urgently needed in our world today when so many religious ideas, even ones that have the power to promote unity/solidarity among diverse people, are twisted and used to tear apart the fabric of community.

This book, with its introduction and thirteen chapters, is divided into four parts: two that are quite short, and two that form the bulk of the book. Part I is comprised simply of the book's introduction and Chapter 1, which focuses on the meaning of “dangerous religious ideas,” and Part IV is similarly brief, comprised of the final two chapters that in turn relate the book's themes specifically to the American public square and to the importance of expanding “the space between dismissing religious ideas as hopelessly problematic or embracing them uncritically” (p. 198). Parts II and III of the book, each with five chapters, focus in turn on two dangerous ideas at the core of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: 1) the idea of scripture—not just ideas in the scriptures of these religions but the very idea of scripture and of having a scripture, and 2) the idea of a particular people or religious community having a special relationship with God, whether, for example, it is a matter of being specially chosen or elected by God for a specific mission or of receiving more divine guidance than is accorded to other peoples.

Chapter 1, “What are Dangerous Religious Ideas?,” begins with Mikva saying that the three words in the title of this book “do not stay still” but rather “shift about like restless children, depending

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on context and perspective.” So instead of defining the phrase “dangerous religious ideas,” she offers reflections on each word in that phrase “to convey their range of meaning and to establish the premises that undergird this inquiry” (p. 17). Central to the book is the claim that “all religious ideas are dangerous” (pp. 4 and 6), or as Mikva also puts it a bit more moderately, “all religious ideas are potentially dangerous” (p. 196).

Many if not most people likely would agree that some religious ideas are dangerous. This is most obviously true when it comes to ideas that blatantly provoke hatred and violence. But is it not something of an exaggeration to say that *all* religious ideas are dangerous or even potentially dangerous? What about the idea that God loves all creatures or the idea that God wants all people to love their neighbors, or even strangers, as they love themselves? Mikva’s point is nonetheless well taken: religious ideas are “good and dangerous” (a phrase central to her book). As I see it—and Mikva has helped me to see it more clearly—many religious ideas (though probably not most) are good and there are dangerous versions of *nearly* all of them. And given the near ubiquity of dangerous religious ideas and how cogently Mikva lays out her arguments for this and the ways these ideas can be successfully combated, I regard this book as one of the most important and insightful books I have read in many years.

Precisely because religious ideas are dangerous, Mikva claims that “self-critical faith is essential” (p. 6). And, fortunately, it is not only essential but, as the subtitle of the book indicates, it has “deep roots” in the religious traditions she explores (and, she acknowledges, in other religions as well). In words that may be said to be her central thesis, Mikva writes: “Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all constructed mechanisms for self-critique and correction that are integral to their teachings” (p. 7). Her book, rich in historical detail, makes the case for this in a thoroughly persuasive way. In the process, it becomes obvious that the mechanisms for self-critique and correction that she examines “are not inventions of reform traditions, but integral to religion itself” (p. 9).

As indicated above, Part II of the book focuses on the idea of scripture. Among the benefits of having a scripture, Mikva cites the following: “It is the sacred story that binds adherents together and shapes their purpose. As a ‘control’ of the human experiment, scripture can test the value of new ideas and serve as a check on our less worthy desires. Its authority can push human beings to grow in goodness, to transform society toward justice—with prophets who call us to account for our moral failings, visions of communities that tend to the poor and the stranger, ontological equality between the sexes, and images of a God overflowing with love and mercy” (p. 36). Among the dangers of having a scripture: “As long as there is a scripture, people will wield the word as a weapon against each other in order to justify their own biases. As long as there is a scripture, we have to reckon with the painful silences of those voices left out of the canon. As long as there is a scripture, some people will turn their back on other God-given ways of knowing” (p. 36).

Throughout Chapter 2, “Scripture as a Dangerous Religious Idea,” Mikva convincingly elaborates the dangers just mentioned as well as other dangers associated with having a scripture. Over the course of the next three chapters she focuses in turn on how each of the three faith traditions explored in her book contain strategies “to manage the life-sustaining capacities of scripture and its life-threatening side effects” (p.45). The titles of these chapters give some indication of how the three traditions carry this out: “Judaism—the Canonization of Controversy” (Chapter 3), “Christianity: The Human Equation” (Chapter 4), and “Islam: The Role of Doubt in Faith”

(Chapter 5). But none of these chapters focuses only on the topic indicated by its title. Rather, all three chapters have exactly the same three section titles—1) “Polysemy and Pluralism,” 2) “Nature of Truth and Human Authority,” and 3) “Accounting for the Human: Epistemological Humility, Doubt, Accommodation, and Change”—indicating that within all three traditions religious authorities and theologians have dealt with the same issues and have affirmed, though not without resistance, what these section titles suggest: 1) scriptural texts have many (even diverse) meanings and therefore it is appropriate that there be a plurality of interpretations of any given text; 2) the nature of divine truth, even as it is revealed in scripture, infinitely exceeds human understanding and thus is open to debate; and, therefore, 3) we should practice epistemological humility, appreciate the role of doubt in the life of faith, realize that whatever divine truth is revealed in scripture is never an exact reflection of that truth but, rather, always an accommodation to human beings in their diverse historical and cultural contexts and with all their other limitations. This means that, while appreciating time-honored scriptural interpretations proven to be life-enhancing, we should be open to innovative interpretations that may give us and our tradition a new lease on the life of faith.

In Chapter 6, “Scripture in the Contemporary Context,” which concludes Part II of this book, Mikva shares summary insights on how we might cultivate the constructive aspects of scripture without unleashing its power to do harm. While some people might think that this would best be done by eliminating dangerous texts from the scriptural canon or by consciously ignoring those texts, Mikva explains why and how limiting harm can be done by “building on tradition” precisely because “tradition, which always recognized the complexity of its scriptural inheritance, opted to interpret the text rather than dismember or discard it” (p. 85). Then, noting that “interpretation is a political act” inasmuch as “it has implications for the ways in which we construct society, the rules we establish for living together, and the world we try to create” (p. 86), Mikva concludes by offering a brief review of some of the uses of scripture in contemporary American politics “in order to mark the hazards, and to examine whether the tools of tradition do or can provide a measure of protection, or even improve public discourse more generally” (p. 88).

Part III focuses on the idea of a particular people having a special relationship with God, usually described as being chosen or elected and often accompanied by supersessionist ideas that have to do with salvation, however diversely the latter is understood. Mikva begins Chapter 7, “A Matrix of Dangerous Ideas,” as follows: “Peoples in the ancient Near East had special relationships with their tribal gods; in essence, each was ‘chosen.’ . . . Initially formed by this model, Israelite religion had to grapple with the profound implications of its developing monotheism on such a relationship. If Yahweh is indeed the God of *all* the world, what does it mean to choose a nation?” She goes on to point out that “Tanakh [the Jewish Bible] records multiple perspectives on the significance of election and God’s relationship with other peoples, while also wrestling with its impact on how humans relate to each other” (p. 95). The same, of course, is true in post-biblical Judaism, as also in the scriptures and traditions of Christianity and Islam. “Chosenness does not mean the same thing in each tradition, nor does it have a single significance within any one of them” (p. 96). Nevertheless, similarities abound among the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Two of the most common dangers connected with chosenness on which Mikva focuses are conquest and the evaluation of difference between the chosen group and other peoples. She does this not only in a general way in Chapter 7 but also in each of the following three chapters that in turn deals with one of the religions under study.

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In chapter 8, “Chosenness in Judaism,” Mikva explains how Jews have grappled with the idea of chosenness, attempting to avoid the dangers inherent in it. In Chapter 9, “Election in Christianity,” and in Chapter 10, “Divine Guidance in Islam,” Mikva examines how Christians and Muslims have developed their own distinctive concepts of chosenness. For Christians this includes the claim that their “election” by God in Christ supersedes the chosen status of Jews. For Muslims this includes the claim that their special relationship with God supersedes both the chosenness of Jews and the election of Christians. She also explains how, like Jews, Christians and Muslims have attempted to avoid the dangers of their versions of chosenness. In addition, “because we should not allow the dangers of election to determine its meaning,” Mikva concludes each of these chapters by exploring its positive religious value, “not unalloyed blessings, but capable of nurturing worthy aspirations and profound ideas, addressing a compelling range of human needs” (p. 101).

Chapter 11, “Enduring Challenges,” brings Part III to a sobering but also hopeful close as Mikva focuses on contemporary expressions of chosenness not only in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (this time in that order) but also in views of American exceptionalism. Dangerous ideas have given rise to and fueled dangerous movements in the three religions and—related to ideas of Christian election—have fanned the flames of dangerous versions of American exceptionalism-qua-nationalism. But, as in the previous chapters, Mikva also lifts up contrapuntal voices in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, demonstrating how the concept of chosenness can yield good fruit and not only bad—and that this can even be the case with the idea of American exceptionalism.

In Part IV, with chapters titled “Religion in the Public Square” (Chapter 12) and “The Space-in-Between” (Chapter 13), Mikva continues to focus her attention on American political life, again in both sobering and hopeful ways. Noting that for much of her life, “progressives seemed to cede the public religious voice to illiberal perspectives, to people who were making religious ideas even more dangerous,” thus giving “the erroneous impression that political liberalism was hostile to religion” (p. 176), Mikva makes a strong appeal for progressives to share their religious convictions on public policies—and, in doing so, to make it clear that self-critical faith is a religiously principled, committed, and fruitful alternative to the types of uncritical and exclusivist expressions of faith that so often dominate the public square.

Acknowledging that “the separation of religion and state serves a vital role in preserving American democracy and also creates broad space for spirituality in all its polymorphous beauty to flourish,” Mikva nonetheless advocates “a ‘conversation’ model in public discourse rather than one of strict separation—a conversation in which ideas are critically engaged” (pp. 176 and 177). But, recall, she doesn’t regard religious self-criticism as a “liberal” versus a “traditionalist” approach to faith. On the contrary, throughout this book she argues persuasively that commitment to our faith traditions requires critical self-examination of our religious beliefs. So it is that “the tools of self-critical faith,” tools that have been developed through the centuries in each of the traditions about which she writes, “have the potential to improve religion in the public square” (p. 175). And it is not only that religion can be improved through such public conversations but that “airing in the public square can potentially advance self-critical faith and public policy at the same time” (p. 178).

In the book's final chapter, Mikva claims that "civil debates in public theology advance deeper understanding of texts, beliefs, and praxis" (p. 197) and she stresses the need for multiple religious voices in these civil debates: "The dynamism and multiplicity of interpretations expand the space between dismissing religious ideas as hopelessly problematic or embracing them uncritically" (p. 198). And while "the collection of religious voices certainly substantiates the dangers of religious ideas, . . . it also initiates a complementary discourse that brings religious wisdom and insight to enhance public discussion in pursuit of the common good" (p. 198).

In my judgment, this book is a nearly perfect example of the kind of religious wisdom and insight that needs to be read and studied—and to be discussed widely in pursuit of the common good and a broad, inclusive solidarity. I could not recommend it more highly.

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