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Biblical Terrorism: With a Platonic Deconstruction

From the point of view of philosophical analysis, there are initial obstacles to any discussion of terrorism, caused by the rather wide and liberal use of the term, "terrorist" in our day. Israeli government officials, for example, prior to recent peace accords, characteristically referred to members of the PLO as "terrorists," in spite of long-standing indications that the PLO had renounced terrorism. And an example closer to home: "pro-choice" advocates in the U.S. speak of "pro-life" protesters (*not* the ones who advocate assassinating abortionists) who block the entrances of abortion clinics as "terrorists" -- which is at least a species of linguistic overkill. "Terrorism" was originally a French term referring to the activities of extermination or banishment perpetrated by the Revolutionary Government in France during the 1790s. Current usage builds on that

meaning, as is illustrated in the *Encyclopedia Britannica's* definition of terrorism as “the systematic use of terror or unpredictable violence against governments, publics, or individuals to attain a political objective.”

When we speak of terrorism in the strict and most prevalent sense,, we have in mind a species of violent action which goes uniquely against standard conventions (even conventions of war) and morals; but with a strategic aim in view (in other words, it is not the sort of random violence perpetrated by a madman who runs into the streets and begins shooting at anyone and everyone); and it often draws justification from some ideal, religious and/or political, that is so overarchingly important that it justifies the suspension of all conflicting moral norms and becomes itself a paramount norm, so that at times indiscriminate killing is “justified” in terms of the attainment of some transcendental or higher good. Religious ideology is a common incentive to terrorism: Bruce Hoffman estimates that about 25% of the terrorist groups presently operative are religiously motivated.¹

But it is so common in our day to discuss terrorism in conjunction with acts or movements of the Palestinian Intifada, or Shiite and Sunni groups such as the Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, that there is a danger of inculcating a stereotype of the religiously oriented terrorist as a Muslim, or at least outside the pale of what we consider to be "Western" civilization. So we need to be reminded that “Western” civilization, permeated as it has been with the constantly metamorphosing and broadly reinterpreted "Judaeo-Christian tradition," has had a tradition of religiously inspired

¹Bruce Hoffman, *“Holy Terror”*: *The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1993), p. 2.

terrorism noteworthy in its own right: With regard to Judaism, one thinks of the assassination of Roman occupiers by the Zealots and, in more recent times, the repeated violent attacks on the Islamic Noble Sanctuary by Israeli fanatics since the seventies, the 1984 "Temple Mount" plot of the Gush Emunim, and the February 1994 massacre of Muslims in Abraham's Mosque in Hebron by an orthodox Jewish settler affiliated with the Rabbi Meir Kahane's radical Kach movement; in Christianity, we find food for thought in the exploits of the medieval Peoples' Crusades, the Anabaptists and Taborites, the Adamites and Tafurs, up to and including contemporary right-wing groups such as the "Order" and the "Covenant," and both Protestant and Catholic terrorist groups in Ireland, not to mention the recent "ethnic cleansing" of Moslem populations by Bosnian Serbs.

Are such phenomena coincidental to religion or in some way connected with religious commitments? Unfortunately, some impressive *prima facie* examples of what we would now call terrorism are to be found in the Old Testament chronicles of the ancient Hebrews, books held sacred and exemplary by Christians and Jews, and one of the most influential sources for what are very loosely called "Judaean-Christian" values. To delve once again into some of these biblical narratives of violence is to plumb the depths of the collective unconscious of Western civilization. But the purpose of such an examination is not just catharsis and intensified self-understanding. It is also an endeavor to return to a perennial philosophical problem broached by Plato -- the problem of the moral influence of literature -- but requiring some special application in the Judaean-Christian context .

Plato's Censure of Poetry, Revisited

To talk about literature's moral influence as a "philosophical problem" in Plato is an understatement. For in a very real sense Plato's well-known questioning of the moral influence of the poets in the *Republic* is the *origin* of Western philosophy, with all its sets and subsets of problems, as a distinct discipline. For far from merely suggesting institutionalized censorship as a desirable accouterment for the ideal polity, Plato was defining the place and function of the philosopher as one who is vocationally and dispositionally at odds with the poet; as one who relies on methodically-applied reason to arrive at truth about human affairs, unlike the poets, who manipulate the emotions, deal in fantasy, and are by vocation outside the proper parameters of truth-seeking.

Granted that this sort of thinking is also the source of the traditional dichotomy between philosophy and literature, truth and fiction, reason and rhetoric -- a disjunction of which both philosophers and literati are perhaps unjustifiably proud; granted that it raises the specter of moral censorship of literature, especially in the context of Plato's authoritarian-elitist ideal "republic"; granted that contemporary Western philosophers, although still by and large in the service of the "truth" and sensing a certain superiority of their enterprise over things like fiction-writing, are nevertheless sufficiently influenced by post-Enlightenment liberalism to eschew anything that smacks of censorship. Still, Plato's problematic goes beyond narrow questions about censorship and state control, and is very relevant to an equally pressing problematic concerning the place of the Bible in contemporary Western culture.

Why did Plato through the instrumentality of Socrates in Books II and III of the *Republic* (391-397) seriously suggest restricting the reading of the works of Homer and Hesiod and other poets -- works which we consider great and lasting classics of Western culture? First of all, it is clear that Plato was not troubled about the effect the reading of such works might have on himself and on other mature thinkers; his concern rather is the effect of many of the stories and the presentations of myth on impressionable youth. There is an element of elitism, in this, of course; but we have to keep in mind that poetry and drama in Plato's time was not just storytelling, but morality plays grounded in Greek religion depicting and extolling or devaluing ways of life. In a society in which art and religion were so closely intertwined, the poet exercised a religious function, somewhat akin to a priest or prophet.

Plato in Book X (598-647) of the *Republic* goes even beyond the strictures of Book III concerning suitable reading matter for the young, and recommends the banishment of poets from his ideal city, not only because they produce tantalizing depictions of duplicitous characters like Achilles who function as major role-models for the more impressionable citizens, but also because as a philosopher he was convinced that reason rather than admixtures of popular mythology and religion should be taken as a standard for behavior. Although the *Republic* is not an ethics per se, it is the foundational impetus to ethics, where the philosopher stakes his claim to having a new and more important gauge to substitute for the iffy and ambiguous gauges of the poets. It is also a claim, which we do well to understand, that in some important sense moral philosophy as a preeminently rational enterprise is to take priority over religion.

This latter claim comes out more explicitly in Plato's *Euthyphro*: This dialogue debates, among other things, the question whether something is right because it is pleasing to God, or pleasing to God because it is morally right. The selfsame question has of course been with us down through the centuries, and becomes particularly pressing whenever we are confronted with individuals or groups who claim divine inspiration or directives for actions which flout our own moral standards. Plato tended towards an emphasis on the primacy of the moral: only that which is moral could and should be pleasing to God (or the gods). But the specific question of duty that gave rise to his analysis (Euthyphro's purported duty of turning in one's father for apparently criminal neglect of a servant) was sufficiently morally ambiguous to leave us with doubts about whether such problems might be more satisfactorily solved by appealing to religious traditions or inspiration. If, however, Euthyphro had been divinely inspired to kill his father in retribution, one may easily surmise that Plato would have come down firmly in favor of replacing such religious enthusiasm with ethical restraint.

In what follows I will argue that the positions taken by Plato in the persona of Socrates in *Republic* II, III, and X, and the *Euthyphro* are not just interesting albeit dated reactions of Plato to some developments in his own time, but are quite relevant to, and even more pressing in, our own time, with respect to Old Testament narratives of what we would now characterize as "terrorist" activities, and the potential religious inspiration derived therefrom. We philosophers, and intellectuals in general, are able to take such narratives by and large with the appropriate "grain of salt"; but we, like Plato, are not concerned about possible influence on ourselves. We may be concerned, however, about the potential influence on the vast numbers of laymen and clergymen

who accept the Bible in a rather literal and historical sense as the "word of God," and derive religious/moral inspiration therefrom.

ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION

Although we may wish to avoid the elitism of Plato and his guardians, it turns out that there indeed exists in our own midst a rather two-tiered approach to interpretation of the "*prima facie*" incitements to terrorism in the Old Testament. Many scripture scholars maintain that most of what appear to be accounts of terrorist atrocities on the part of the Israelites is simply the result of the buildup of legends about religious heroes by later writers -- not strictly fabrications, but boastful exaggerations meant to bolster the self-perceptions of the devotees of Yahweh. This of course is not a very satisfactory explanation for the believer who looks to the canonical Scriptures for the salvific "word of God." And since a belief in the intervention of God in human history is certainly a keynote and perhaps a defining characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, one wonders how much nonhistoricity is compatible with this tradition itself. If, for example, Abraham never existed, as some scripture scholars assert, and Moses never received the Ten Commandments from God, and Joshua never really carried out all those expeditions in Canaan, etc., etc. -- the Jew or Christian whose faith is by definition historically oriented may perceive the foundations of faith pulled out from beneath him or her.

But let us suppose that the scripture scholars are *correct*, and that most or even all of the narratives in the Old Testament are mythic expressions of a subjective faith:

still, as meaningful myths, all the more do the accounts in question encapsulate *values* which without doubt influence the thinking and ideals even of theologically informed religious persons who take their historicity with a "grain of salt" but do not have enough "grains of salt" to cover *all* the mythically encapsulated values they are confronted with. We may assume that there are a large number of people who, due to enlightened faith or religious apathy, are *not* in such a situation; but there are also presumably many who *are*. It is of course with these latter groups in mind that I proceed in my analysis.

After discussing the origins of *prima facie* terrorism in the Old Testament, and the constellation of values connected with this phenomenon, I will consider some present implications and applications, and suggest a solution that will draw some inspiration from Plato's twofold problematic mentioned above.

PROFILE OF OLD TESTAMENT TERRORISM

As we shall see, some types of violence countenanced in the Old Testament, while differing in some important respects from modern terrorism, also bear significant similarities, especially on the ideological plane, to many forms of modern terrorism.

Old Testament terrorism is best understood in the context of two important ambiguities:

There existed first of all a tremendous ambiguity in regard to the attitude of Yahweh-God towards non-Hebrews. On the one hand, a) Yahweh's promises of territory and settlements to the Hebrews are accompanied by exhortations to live in peaceful coexistence with outsiders or foreigners: "You shall not molest or oppress an

alien" (*Exodus* 22:20, 23:9); but b) in scriptural accounts the possession of territory by the Israelites is accompanied as a matter of course by massive, and purportedly divinely-ordained, dispossessions of aliens: as Jehoshaphat puts it in his naive and uncomprehending prayer concerning the resistance from the Ammonites and the Moabites to Israelite occupation of land, "Are you not our God, you who have dispossessed the inhabitants of this land for Israel your people?... Will you our God not execute judgement on them, since we are helpless against this vast horde attacking us?" (II *Chronicles* 20:7). From the viewpoint of the non-Hebrews, of course, these attacks were defensive acts to prevent expropriation of their lands!

There is an equally important ambiguity with regard to the projected violent or nonviolent propensities of God: a) On the one hand, we seem to find an absolute rejection of indiscriminate violence implied when Abraham, looking over the doomed Sodom, whose inhabitants he hopes to save, says to God: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Should not the judge of all the world act with justice?" (*Genesis* 18:25) Then God, responding to Abraham's plea, facilitates the escape of a handful of innocent people, before the destruction of Sodom. But b) this is the same God who is credited for slaying the firstborn children of the Egyptians, many of whom were presumably innocent, in *Exodus* 12, and the same God who, according to scriptural accounts concerning Moses, commanded dispossession of inhabitants to make way for the Israelites (*Numbers* 33:55-56), and devised the "ban" (*harem*) -- a "scorched earth" policy which was supposed to involve the complete slaughter of men, women and children, and sometimes even animals, for the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites,

Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and others (*Deuteronomy* 3:2, 7:2-5, 20:16; *Numbers* 2:34, 3:3; *Joshua* 6:21, 8:26-28, 11:20; see also I *Samuel* 15:3, 28:18; II *Samuel* 21). (One partial exception was the destruction of the Midianites, since the lives of "virgins" were spared as a concession to the desires of Moses' soldiers [Numbers 31:17-31]). God's wrath was not just reserved for foreigners, however. In a number of instances God is said to have exterminated or threatened to exterminate, heretical or recalcitrant Israelites (*Exodus* 33: 3, 5; *Deuteronomy* 13:13; *Numbers* 16:25ff; II *Kings* 9:6-7, 10:30; *Ezekiel* 21:6-10, 23:47).

Joshua, following Moses' lead, is reported to have successfully implemented the divine total-extirpation "ban" against 31 cities. If we were to take seriously some of the Biblical campaign reports, apparently hundreds of thousands of inhabitants were slaughtered indiscriminately (see e.g. *Joshua* 6:21, 8:24-25, 10, 11, 12). Perhaps as an offshoot of such ambiguities, many similar examples of what we would now call "atrocities," "massacres," or "terrorism" could be brought forward from the Old Testament. In the beginning they were perpetrated under the rubric of a divine injunction; but often presented later under the rubric of military strategy or power plays. We read, for example, that David, while under the protection of King Achish, secretly conducted raids on the tribes allied with Achish; and later returned to slaughter all inhabitants to keep them from informing the king (I *Samuel* 27:9,11). (The importance of what translation is used is exemplified by another Davidic incident: In some translations (e.g. the Vulgate, King James, and Douay bibles, we find in II *Samuel* 12:31 that "David...bringing forth the people..., sawed them, and drove over them chariots armed with iron: and divided them with knives, and made them pass through brick-kilns.

So did he to all the cities of the children of Ammon." In the New American bible and other contemporary translations the same passage reads: "He...led away the inhabitants, whom he assigned to work with saws, iron picks, and iron axes, or put to work at the brickmold. This is what he did to all the Ammonite cities"!)

Accounts of some apparently sadistic implementations of the "ban" are also found in later Hebrew chronicles (see e.g. I *Maccabees* 5:5).

CONTRIBUTORY CAUSES AND ASSOCIATED VALUES

Doubtlessly -- as is the case with the history of slavery -- one would have to consider the moral values implicit in such accounts with judicious qualifiers concerning the relative state of moral consciousness reached in the past, so that moral standards widely accepted today will not be simplistically applied to very different historical contexts. The Hebrews considered themselves to be the champions of the worship of the true God in an era dominated by polytheistic and demonic idolatry; claimed territorial rights, which they thought to be guaranteed by God, in a context of what we would call "lawless" regional competition for power and possession; and eventually came to feel that it was imperative to avoid compromising their theocratic culture and values by any type of close and habitual association with foreigners. How else could they maintain the tribal and religious purity on which their salvation as a people depended, than by using extreme measures? Would we act any differently?

Nevertheless it is possibly important for all, especially in our nuclear era, to avoid bringing about a similar conjunction of inciting conditions; so an understanding of these

conditions is incumbent on us. Four important contributory factors for such terroristic species of violence in the Old Testament can be differentiated; and these factors, as we shall see, seem to be also of the utmost relevance to many contemporary instances and types of terrorism:

1) *Ambiguity in the concept of God*: In seeing a religious people rallying under the banner of their God to adopt what we would now call terroristic or even genocidal values, one comes face-to-face with the awful importance of the precise characteristics attributed to their God by religious devotees, and also with the possible modifications that believers may make in the overall concept of the divinity. Inconsistencies leap out at us. Yahweh the warrior God is described rather uniformly as adamantly opposed to the practices of child sacrifice among idolaters, and yet is represented as ordering the slaughter of the *children* of idolaters as well as their mothers and fathers, by the Hebrews! Yahweh is represented as slaughtering the children of the Egyptians in order to make the exodus of the Israelites possible, and yet the Hebrews also attribute perfidy to the enemies of Israel because they "oppress (Yahweh's) hereditary people, murdering and massacring widows, orphans and guests" (Psalm 94:6). Finally, God is described as slaughtering the Hebrews themselves on occasions when they stray from the law, but also is characterized numerous times as a kind, patient and gentle father, loving his people with a passion, although complaining bitterly when he is not given signs of affection and respect. (Granted, the apparently contradictory characterizations sometimes appear in passages widely separated as regards the time of the writing, and/or the time depicted; but the *believer* does not approach Scripture as an historian or scholar, and does not make the fine distinctions that the latter might make.)

In regard to such ambiguity and ambivalence, one is impressed by the very human tendency to attribute our own objectives, motivations and actions to a divinity; the idea of God is admittedly one which has required and undergone much refinement from primitive times. The very existence of contradictory aspects in God is an indicator that the idea of the divinity is still inchoate, in development, in need of refinement. But *it is a basic axiom in logic that "a contradiction can prove anything"* -- if there is a contradiction in any place in our deductions, *any* arbitrary conclusion can be drawn. And similarly in religion, *an ambiguous or contradictory concept of God can support and justify any kind of response*. This is an inherent danger in all religion, and the reason some have even decided that all religion is pernicious. Unless we presume that a clearer, more consistent, and certainly noncontradictory concept of God is also attainable, we must join the skeptics in warning against, and guarding against, religion, because of the extremes to which it will inevitably lead under duress.

2) "Chosenness," and the covenant: The Israelites were assured in the Old Testament, through covenants ratified successively through Abraham (*Genesis 17:4-7*), Isaac (*Genesis 17:21*) and David (*Isaiah 55:3, Jeremiah 33:17*) that they were to be granted certain special rights and privileges. In exchange, obedience and loyalty to Yahweh, and extremely high standards of behavior, were expected for the Israelites (*Exodus 24:1-18*). God, as possessor of all the earth, as one party to the covenant, gives the Israelites rights to broad expanses of rich territory -- rights which function like a title to "eminent domain" over the property of others, even of actual, legitimate inhabitants. Rights of special protection from enemies, of prosperity, and of fruitfulness of progeny, are also written into the covenant.

Needless to say, an entire people begins to think of itself as especially gifted and favored, the chosen vessels for God's rule over the whole world (see e.g. Psalms 47, 105, 110), free from laws not enunciated by Yahweh, not bound by their own intra tribal norms of morality when dealing with religious/ethnic outsiders, not responsible for the fate of those who because of commitment to false gods and moral turpitude are not included in the covenant as God's "hereditary people."

Variations on the idea of "chosenness" have of course survived into the twentieth century -- the Russian orthodox claim of being the "third Rome," the American conception of "manifest destiny" which prevailed in the nineteenth century, Roman Catholic insistence over the centuries on the formula, "outside the Church no salvation" up to the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Zionist vision of Jewish settlements on the West Bank as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies, the Boer doctrine of the prerogatives and precedence of Christian whites in South Africa, and the Mormon claim of reestablishing the "lost tribes of Israel" in America. The idea of "chosenness" is a powerful religious concept which leads in its more shadowy ramifications to Herculean efforts to maintain doctrinal and dispensational purity, self-enforced isolation, and when necessary, agonized combat against those who threaten, or seem to threaten, the spiritual cohesiveness of the chosen. Thus when conflicting claims between the chosen and the nonchosen develop, as between the ancient Israelites and the Canaanites, or modern Zionists and Palestinians, or Sikh or Muslim Minorities and the Hindu majority in India, those who believe in divine election are almost bound in extreme circumstances to assert their rights by force, in opposition to claims in deference to which there can be no negotiation. For God has spoken.

Special problems develop, of course, if and when those whose faith assures them that they are "chosen" encounter enemies with vastly superior military might and organizational stability. In such cases terrorism may be the "court of last resort," since such enemies (who are also perceived as the enemies of God), it may be argued, must be stopped at any cost from preventing the accomplishment of the absolute purposes of God on earth.

3) **The Need for Deterrence through Fear:** Religious considerations aside, once a people decides to use force to fend off threats, and in particular continual threats and habitual threats, posed by a superior power -- the special value of fear and terror cannot be ignored. The ostensibly positive attitude towards real or mythologized terrorist strategies by the ancient Hebrews was instigated primarily by situations in which the "chosen people," surrounded on every side by threats to their existence and/or to their faith or religious discipline, decided that military prowess was not enough. In order to be victorious, the Hebrews, seeming to be outnumbered by, or vastly weaker in weaponry than, their enemy, edged (whether really or in wishful thinking) toward an alternative strategy (which they were not the first to adopt) open to them: to strike such unspeakable terror in the minds of enemies that the enemies would not even consider attacking; to be so merciless that the enemy and their progeny would tremble before the legendary force and brutality of God's chosen earthly instruments. Once in vogue, this legend could be a kind of moral "insurance policy" against further attacks and challenges. And insofar as sheer population density of one people over against another was an important factor in eventual victory, the slaughter of women and children would not really be "indiscriminate" (so the reasoning goes), but a quite discriminate

judgement against the continued generational growth of a people whose ancestors would presumably continue to threaten the chosen people, just as their forebears had done.

4) *The Arduous Demands of Confessional Purity*: To remain "a people apart", dedicated to Yahweh, uncontaminated -- in doctrine, ritual, and dietary laws -- by the wide and wild variety of practices and ideas rampant among their neighbors, was no mean task for the Hebrews. While some economic interchange might be innocuous, social commerce and intermarriage were eventually considered grave threats to solidarity and fidelity. The written and unwritten proscriptions against consorting with foreigners inevitably inculcated a situational exclusiveness. Strategically, it seems that the paucity of foreigners living among the Israelites in many stages of their development was a military *handicap*, since any enemy bent on exterminating the Israelites as a people would have no difficulty separating them out from others among whom they were distributed; they were, so to speak, "sitting ducks," highly visible, who could be easily spotted, surrounded and attacked. How could one maintain security in such a situation? Preemptive strikes and what would now be called systematic genocidal diminution of surrounding populations was a strategy that could not help but suggest itself to the mind of a patriot. The foreigners who would dare to infiltrate, on an equal footing, the life and culture and politics of this proprietary people of Yahweh would experience such wrath and terror that a natural counterbalance would arise to the military advantage the foreigners would otherwise possess from their easy-targeting capabilities.

To generalize from the chronicles of the Hebrews: We see them as a people apt to resort to terrorism after being consolidated and confirmed by a religious heritage

which singles them out for special privileges in return for extremely exacting responsibilities to their deity; and which, caught up in temporary but prolonged threats to their survival as a distinct people with uncompromisable traditions, gravitated towards strategies, purportedly implemented, which we would now call "terroristic". These strategies can be characterized as a species of "overkill" designed to inculcate absolutely disabling fear in any potential attacker or conqueror, as well as to implement what we would call now long-range "genocidal" objectives, calculated to inhibit the growth of a particular population to unconscionable numerical superiority.

Noticeable in the terrorist mentality is a feeling of religious superiority, or "chosenness," accompanied with an ambiguity regarding the way in which the religiously privileged status is to be manifested in this present politico-social world; there is also a strong sentiment for the necessity of maintaining intra communal or confessional solidarity, for warding off intrusion from nonmembers, and occasionally for giving demonstrations of violence so definitive or brutal that it might serve as a deterrent to aggression from the uncomfortably vast numbers of hostile populations in their ambit.

Although the focus in this essay is on terror in the "Judaean-Christian" tradition, it is possible that the terror attributed to Palestinian or Iranian groups in our day may be conceived as part of this same tradition, at least if we take into account long-standing Islamic traditions. For, as is well-known, Muslim traditions include claims of descent from Ishmael, Abraham's son, and rightful entitlement to the promises made to *all* the descendants of Abraham in the initial covenant [see *Genesis* 17:4-7; the *Koran* 2:119-141]. Thus, from the fundamentalist Islamic point of view, the ancient struggle for rights

to divine inheritance between Ishmael and Isaac, is still going on, with themselves as major claimants unjustly deprived of their covenantal heritage.

And if, as some scripture scholars assert, Islam is the cultural heir of the Christian Monophysite heresy which spread in the early middle ages to Egypt, the connection with the Judaeo-Christian tradition would be even closer.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

If we confine our attention to the *religiously*-motivated terrorism exemplified in the Old Testament, omitting consideration of terrorism in its wider ambit or its analogous senses, we find that certain approaches to the solution of terrorism suggest themselves from a further analysis of the four factors associated with it. The emphasis here must of course be on long-range axiological solutions rather than on practical tactics or political strategies:

1) **Ethical Reevaluation of Religious Concepts:** To someone who believes, like the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, that the religious sphere has an absolute and unquestionable priority over the ethical, the suggestion that the religious should be subject to ethical evaluation seems to verge on the blasphemous. Here some all-important interpretative principles come into play: It is one thing to hold that the religious should be superior to the ethical in some respects, or with regard to certain areas of discourse, but quite another to hold that the religious must always hold precedence. This latter position seems to entail, for example, that the concept of God has not undergone any evolution from past eras, such that an ethical refinement of an

initially very rough concept (containing many unnecessary human accretions) has not taken place. But the opposite seems to be the case.

The story of Abraham preparing to follow a "divine command" to slay his son Isaac (in *Genesis*), and then receiving an eleventh-hour reprieve from an angel as he is about to carry out the slaughter -- is a case-in-point. Surely it is more reasonable to believe that Abraham, in an era in which religious practices included the sacrifice of children as an essential element (in Abraham's native Ur, sacrifice of the first-born was a frequent ritual in honor of the moon God, Sin), initially conceived of child-sacrifice as something he should also do for his God, but then came to his senses at the last minute, realized the ethical perversity of his act, but projected his newly-formed ethical insight onto an "angel" (in those days before the advent of what we call individual "conscience"). Or in a more traditional vein one could hold that an angel was actually sent to inculcate this important ethical insight into the "father of nations." But to defend (as Kierkegaard does in *Fear and Trembling*) the notion of a God who, on the one hand, does not slaughter the innocent (and certainly not innocent heirs of the covenant), who does not "punish children for the sins of their parents" (*Deuteronomy* 24:16) and yet, on the other hand, commands slaughter of Abraham's innocent firstborn just to test Abraham's spiritual "mettle," evinces such a high degree of ethical ambiguity (especially in a situation where "everyone is doing it") that we would have to conclude that such religious inspirations are ethically retrogressive.²

²This interpretation is developed in H. Kainz, *Ethics in Context: Towards the Definition and Differentiation of the Morally Good* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), p. 122.

In other words, religious concepts can and must be subjected to ethical reexamination, they must pass "ethical muster" -- otherwise we end up with powerful and immensely dangerous "religious" incentives to terrorism, slavery, subjection of women, inquisitions, witch-burnings, holy wars and other abuses of religion peppering the history of the "Western world." By "ethical reexamination" I do not mean "deferral to conscience," purely and simply, but the coordination of conscience and good intention with objective norms -- e.g. the "natural law," which, however nuanced it might be, would certainly include among its "thou-shalt-nots" a prohibition of child sacrifice.

2) **A Deeper Understanding of "Chosenness":** In the religious and ecclesiastical sphere we are confronted with a bewildering variety of claims to the effect that a certain group has been in some way specially "chosen" by God: Not only Catholics, Protestants and Jews, but also Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists have been known on occasion to present such a claim. This is not the place to dispute or champion any such claims. But let us presume that God did choose in a special way the Jews, who in any case have *prima facie* the longest-running claim on entitlement to "chosenness." For what purpose would such election be? Believers convinced that they are thus "chosen" would have to presume that they were not just singled out for privileges and preeminence and prerogatives, to the exclusion of others (otherwise God's wisdom in creating so many of the others might be seriously called into question). The theological answer frequently given to the enigma of divine election is that God chose the Israelites, including the tribe of Judah, with a view to the preservation and spread of the true (monotheistic) concept of the divinity, and human responsibilities to the divinity. This might entail certain privileges and special protection.

Nevertheless -- *noblesse oblige*; the privileges bring with them concomitant responsibilities, in this case propagation of the true monotheistic faith in the world at large. This latter idea, of a mission to the world, was not initiated by Christianity with its "gospel," but is found well before Christianity in the psalms and prophetic books, in which Israel is depicted as being a light to the world, and in ecumenical fashion absorbing believers from all nations (see *Isaiah* 2:3-4, 49:6, 60:14; *Psalms* 87, 99, 102). Temporary or periodic isolation may conceivably be implied by chosenness, insofar as an intense introspective period of religious consolidation may be necessary as a preparation for a world mission. But the end purpose of "chosenness" seems inimical to changeless self-identity and isolation. The observation enunciated in the Christian gospel -- "unless the seed falling into the ground die, it itself will remain alone" -- seems to have a wider metaphorical applicability than just to Christianity.

3) The Untenableness of a Genocidal Military Strategy: At present we use the term "genocide" in an extremely pejorative sense, usually with reference to what is ambiguously called "state terrorism," e.g. Nazi Germany against the Jews, Iraq against the Kurds, Stalin's totalitarian purges of the Ukrainians, "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. But genocide as part of religious-terrorist strategy is not mere extermination under the direction of a tyrant, but has the more nuanced sense of preemptive warfare: We must visualize a situation in which an entire population perceives another entire population as bent not only on its total extermination but on the obliteration of its cultural and religious achievements (the other population may possibly also have the same perception). In other words, it approximates a "kill or be killed" set of conditions between communities or nations rather than individuals. In this context, there can be no effective and

meaningful differentiation of combatants from noncombatants. Women and children and noncombatant men, as contributors or potential contributors (even through giving birth to future generations) to the overall strength of an absolutely perverse culture are potentially as threatening as actual combatants. In the minds of a people threatened in this absolute manner, it is not just a question of using sufficient force just to defend oneself from this or that attack, but fighting for its continued existence by elimination of an uncompromising nemesis. To be sure, one or both of the populations in question may be responsible for instigating this situation by their religious or ethnic exclusivism, prohibition of intermarriage and social interaction, differences in language and culture as well as moral diversities -- leading to ignorance of the other, suspicion, and a chronic anxiety requiring some suitable response. But, whatever the initial incitements, at a certain point the fear and suspicion become so intense that the isolation or mutual isolation becomes irredeemable and irreparable; there is no turning back. The kind of absolute hostility that we now call "genocide" becomes the "solution."

The unsatisfactory nature of this solution to perceived threats to the existence of a people may be obliquely pointed out if we examine the still classic analogous instance of the envisaged massive existence-threatening situation -- the nuclear-war strategy of "mutually assured destruction" (M.A.D.) adopted by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R in the 60s and now calling for some bewildering revisions: It has always been clear to the man on the street that mutual nuclear annihilation is not a "solution" to the problem of defense. And it was certainly clear to strategists and moralists alike that to continue to threaten such suicidal destructiveness without in some way implementing the threats or even intending to implement them would lead to a lack of credibility, to say the least. The

temporary, compromise way of seeming to "do something" was to build up gargantuan stockpiles of weaponry. With huge reserves of overkill to insure their threat-credibility, each of the parties possessed a veritable "doomsday machine" which could conceivably bring about the obliteration of all life on earth. And then even this arsenal was added to, or modernized, to make the madness complete....

The parallel of the nuclear standoff with the patterns of terrorism we have considered helps to clarify the nature of terrorism: perhaps the threat of terror is largely a bluff, used to deter aggression, and advanced with the hope that it will never have to be used; still, any choice of a terrorist strategy, no matter how extreme the threat to communal existence may be, requires a continuance of terror; a dominant world power must *both* intend to do the terrible things that it boasts it is capable of, *and* augment *ad infinitum* its power to carry out its intentions, as well as (presumably, eventually) actually do, or almost do, terrible and unspeakable things to maintain the *credibility* of its announced intentions and its own reputation for toughness and inflexibility with regard to the enemy or enemies. Such a contemporary counterpart of the "ban," even as a military strategy chosen as a last resort, is so suicidally self-defeating that it may ultimately leave no devotees to serve the God (or the "ideals of Western civilization" in a secularized version) for the sake of which the "ban"-like strategy was purportedly implemented.

4) **Exclusivity itself as a Paradigmatic Danger:** If genocidal intentions are suicidal, unconditional surrender could be equally suicidal. Between the horns of this dilemma, a generally integrative strategy presents itself as a solution, and perhaps the only solution. This is, of course, the strategy later adopted in the centuries in which the

Jewish diaspora prevailed, a unique mixture of ethnic-religious self-consciousness and adaptation to multiple social-national environments. But if such a strategy developed among the ancient Israelites, it is largely ignored by the chroniclers. There are cases recorded (see e.g. *Judges 18:27*) in which tribes or towns wanted to live in peaceful coexistence with the Hebrews, but were reportedly ruthlessly exterminated consistently with the strategy of the "ban."

The "ban" is and was a last-ditch instrument of security through elimination of external threats to an intentionally separated people. But if separation was a viable means to preservation of the lives and culture *and identity* of a people in past eras, it no longer holds such promise. In an era in which "backpack" or "suitcase" nuclear bombs could be smuggled into areas where one embattled population lives in exclusivity, integration and intermingling, as well as social and intellectual interaction, with the "enemy" or potential enemy, is itself a *strategy*, even the strategy-of-choice -- a strategy fraught with danger, but entailing the most optimistic possibilities for national and international survival.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS, SOME PLATONIC

It is a truism that religion has been a force in history bringing with it both great benefits and great dangers. The conviction of having a direct relationship to God and being directly responsible only to Him, has been an important factor in the emancipation of men from autocratic oppression and social conformism; and the conviction of "chosenness" has impelled individuals and peoples to formidable moral achievements.

But these same convictions, as we know from history, can lead to extremes of destructiveness. The Bible contains admirable incentives to the heights of morality, but also must be subjected to moral judgement. "Chosenness" is a distinctive idea in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which can unleash at its best great integrative forces, but at its worst fierce and intransigent contempt for, or indifference to, others. Old Testament narratives extolling what we would now call "terrorist" activities -- even if they are *not* historically accurate -- proffer ideals which might easily be put into effect in history by believers and, in secularized form, by nonbelievers. While scripture *scholars* may view *prima facie* acts of terrorism in the Old Testament as largely fictional accounts, of interest primarily for information provided about the development of religious and cultural consciousness of the Israelites, the religious person who approaches the scriptures for inspiration and guidance is listening to a "different drummer."

I will conclude with a reconsideration of the two themes in Plato discussed at the outset of this essay:

1) **Platonic diffidence about the influence of poetry:** Plato's apparent vendetta against the poets may, as has already been indicated, be best understood as an attempt to install reason and philosophy in the place of the ambiguous potpourri of values found in the fictional accounts of the gods and heroes, as the major moral force in his time. The fact that he gravitated towards an aristocratic censorship of literature by a political elite, is of course a byproduct of his distrust of the disorders associated with democracy, a form of government about which we moderns are more sanguine, just as we are more diffident about censorship. But although Plato was unsuccessful in inspiring the adoption of his ideal state, as well as the censorship that would go with it,

his critique of the poets was a huge success, simply because it was a necessary element in the differentiation and signalization of philosophy as a distinct discipline, the acceptance of which had been impeded by the immense influence of the poets. With philosophy in the ascendancy, people might be able to achieve, like Plato, a certain distance and objectivity about poetic narratives, and come to look on them, as we moderns do, as mere "fiction." But while most moderns look upon epics and plays and novels as fiction, many do not view scriptural narratives, even terroristic narratives, in the same light. Of course they have the assurance of the scripture scholars that accounts are to be understood only as very subjective expressions of the development of the faith-experience of imperfect and sinful creatures like you and me. Good advice. But Plato's problem remains, this time perhaps to be solved not by philosophers but by theologians who can explain to the average person how a believer in a *historically focused* religion like Christianity can take incident after incident in Old and New Testament alike as nonhistorical *but* still important bases of a faith worth living and dying for.

2) **Plato's critique of religious/moral norms:** The questions of homicide and genocide we have been considering seem morally unambiguous enough to allow most of us to come down squarely on the side of the Plato of the *Euthyphro*: such actions could not conceivably be pleasing to, or even commanded by, the sort of God conceptualized in our tradition; therefore the idealization of these actions should be pruned out of hand from one's religious value-system. However, for us to suggest like Plato in the *Republic* that inhumane ideals in writings with religious authoritativeness should be considered ipso facto nonauthoritative, and like Plato in the *Euthyphro* that

only morally right acts could be pleasing to God, does not necessarily entail the position that religion can say nothing autonomously about morality, or should even be subjected to moral censorship. For there is still one sphere of morality left to religion, in which it can be both autonomous and authoritative without coming into conflict with morality: the sphere of the supererogatory (outside the parameters of what Kant called "strict duties"). This is a sphere transcending morality, insofar as it is concerned with going beyond justice to benevolence and beneficence, going beyond the duties to kinfolk and compatriots to yet other duties to strangers and even enemies, and in general going beyond the strict requirements of morality to adhere to still higher norms of love and beneficence. This is a sphere of action and endeavor which is adumbrated and inculcated in all major religions, and perhaps stands as the main moral contribution of religion to date. In other words, the proper domain of religion is the further corroboration of already existent moral norms (as e.g. with the Ten Commandments) or incentives towards going beyond mere considerations of entitlement (as e.g. with ancient Hebrew laws for periodic forgiveness of debtors and periodic release of indentured servants).³

But morality has withal a certain autonomy and can, on occasion, stand in timely judgment over religion. The terrorist who believes he is doing a service to God by his terrorism is not in need of a higher or more subtle degree of religious inspiration, but of a conscience; and the more religiously committed a person is, the more important it is

³Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

that he or she take the clearly inhumane or immoral idealizations to be found in Scripture -- whether these be historical *or* fictional -- with the traditional "grain of salt."