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# EITHER/OR

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Rabbi Alan Lurie

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**L**ast week my wife and I returned from a wonderful 2-week visit to Israel. We traveled from the pastoral Sea of Galilee to the silent Dead Sea, from ancient Jerusalem to the mystical city of Tzfat, and from the empty dry Negev Desert to modern bustling Tel Aviv. Toward the end of the trip, as we were finishing our travels, I told my wife—who was raised in Israel—that although I was sad to leave the Holy land, I was looking forward to the returning to the quiet predictable calm of New York City! She flashed me a knowing smile and said, “Israel is certainly intense.” Of course New York City is also intense, but its intensity primarily surrounds worldly pursuits and material gain. Here in New York, people chase market share, notoriety, wealth, culture, entertainment, and education. This pressure creates a city that is vital and exciting. Israel’s intensity, however, felt quite different. That tiny piece of earth, which is holy to Jews, Muslims, and Christians, carries the imprint of four thousand years of religious revelation, conflict, destruction, pain, and rebirth. Israel’s intensity is born from its unavoidable obsession with questions of faith and religion. Perhaps this is why, in spite of its small size, Israel is so often the focus of the world’s attention, because the world knows that this is the center of religious passions, and that religious passions, when unleashed, can have devastating consequences.

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Whether one is an orthodox Jew living in a strictly religious community, a secular Jew who has never set foot in a synagogue, a Christian pilgrim following the footsteps of Jesus, a Muslim stopping to pray at the call of the minaret, or a tourist viewing the ruins of holy sites and crusader fortresses, religion is ubiquitous, and it seems that in Israel people are defined by their view on religion, even if that view is dismissive. The orthodox community condemns as heretics those who are less observant, the nonreligious paint the orthodox as fanatics, and each faith seems to see the other as, at best, strange or flawed, and at worst evil. It is a polarized county, where one is either committed to a rigorous religious life or a life of complete secularism, antagonistic to religion.

It is disturbing to learn that in the land where faith was born and nurtured there is so much anger toward religion. This anger, however, is understandable and is certainly not limited to those who live in Israel. At times, the history of religion has been less than comforting—often leaving in its wake a trail of persecution, narrow-mindedness, and war. No wonder so many have rejected anything that carries a sniff of religion. Because of its history (and, perhaps, the nature of the land), Israel amplifies this feeling. I often hear people who are angry at religion claim that religion has been the cause of most wars. Although this is partially true, it is important to note,

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however, that most of the deadliest wars, including both World Wars, the Civil War, the Napoleonic Wars, the conquests of ancient Rome, Greece, Babylonia, and Egypt were not religious wars but were wars of secular ideology or ambition. Nevertheless, religion has left its scars.

We now live in the aftermath of the Age of Reason, though, when much of the irrationality and dogma of established religion has been examined and rejected. When Rene Descartes, the 17th-century French philosopher and scientist, declared, "I think therefore I am," he set a new bottom line for understanding our existence and our ability to discern reality. His statement tells us that we do not need to rely on dogma to know the world and that we can rely on our own reason to determine what is true. This seems obvious to us today, but Descartes' philosophy shattered the accepted reliance on received doctrine and shifted responsibility for transmitting truths from the authority of established religion to our own minds. This was a crucial and desperately needed adjustment after the atrocities of rigid religion and its rejection of the new findings of science.

We have also come to learn that reason is not enough. When we rely solely on our own intellect and our capacity for reason to guide our lives, we risk locking ourselves in to a rationalist theology that can be as extreme as any religious fundamentalism. When, because of our anger or disappointment with

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religion, we reject the possibility that also other avenues of understanding are available to us outside of our own minds, we can create a world view that is as rigid as any religious doctrine. This belief, that anyone who disagrees with you is ignorant or fanatic, has led to the worst atrocities in human history. It begins with the conviction that anyone who disagrees with you is wrong. This leads to the desire to convince the other person of your way. When this fails, you might decide to forcefully coerce the other and, finally, to silence any point of view that is different than yours. There is a wry observation that illustrates this way of thinking:

*There are three types of drivers in the world:*

*First, there are those who drive slower than you. These are idiots.*

*Second, there are those who drive faster than you. These are maniacs.*

*Third, there is you. The one perfect driver.*

This sense, that only your way is the right way, that you have the monopoly on truth, is what leads to fanaticism and polarity. What all extremists have in common is a belief that they have the one answer, and that all other views are wrong, ignorant, delusional, or destructive. Buddhism calls this belief “the illusion of duality”—the false perception that everything is either “this” or “that,” good or bad, my way or your way—and points to this illusion as the root

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of all our suffering. What is needed is a middle path of reconciliation, in which we see that apparent opposites, such as faith and reason, actually point toward that same end.

Recently, while teaching a Bible study class, I mentioned that reconciling the Bible's story of creation with the theory of evolution is no problem. As I was preparing to explain this point, one of the men in the class stood up, hit the table with his palm, and shouted, "Bullshit!" "Let me explain what I mean," I said. "There is nothing you can say," he shouted. "It's bullshit." Surprisingly, this person is not a religious fundamentalist who is threatened by science but is an avowed atheist who rejects religion because of its inherent un-provability. He refused to hear that there might be some consistency between faith and reason, and in that moment he was as irrational as those that he condemns. The short answer to the reconsolidation of religion and science is that they address completely different, but essential, subjects. Religion is focused on **faith** and attempts to answer such questions as, "What does it mean to lead a moral life?" "How can we find purpose?" "What are our responsibilities to others?" and "How can we transcend the limits of our five senses to connect to the Divine?" Science teaches **facts** and answers such questions as the following: "How old is the Universe?" "How do matter and energy interact?" "How can we cure disease?" and "How can we travel to the moon?"

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As we learn more about the nature of matter, the origins of the Universe, the science of consciousness, and the makeup of our bodies, we discover that the line between reason and faith is blurring. In a Universe of 100 billion galaxies with 100 billion stars, emerging from a single point no larger than an atom, with at least 10 dimensions, particles that oscillate one trillion times per second, and where the intentionality of the observer has quantifiable effects on the location of probable electrons, we discover that the division between mind, body, and spirit is an illusion and that we are infinitely more than we can possibly imagine. In this light, to believe that we possess the one, only way is the height of arrogance. Now, neither reason nor faith is enough. Modern theology and modern science are rapidly discovering the unified middle path. Dr. M. Scott Peck, one of the leaders in the field of merging science with faith, wrote of his hope for the future:

*When we think we know the reason for everything and there is only one reason, we are cursed by either/or thinking.... So we are envisioning a world where a business can make a profit and be ethical. Where a government can promote political order and social justice. Where medicine can be practiced with technological proficiency and compassion. Where children can be taught science and religion. Our vision is one of integration. By integration we do not mean squashing two or more things together into*

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*a colorless unisex blob. When we talk of integrating science and faith, we are not speaking of returning to an age of primitive faith, where science is discounted, any more than we are arguing for the status quo where a limited science is idolized while faith is relegated to an hour on Sunday.*

This seamless melding of faith and reason is ultimately the only path to peace. May we see that day when places of extremist passions and polarization are finally calmed with this realization!

Wishing you a week of travel down the middle road.  
Alan