

Common Bridges

A Narrative of Father & Son



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&

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Father and Son

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Being invited by his son, Amos Guiora, to contribute to this exciting project with Professor Alexander Guiora's work as the main point of reference is a great honor. My own contact with Professor Guiora goes back to March 7, 2009, when he was kind enough to recommend my manuscript *The Secular Outlook* to the editors of Wiley-Blackwell.¹ During our first e-mail contact Professor Guiora discussed with me one of the most important stories in the Hebrew Bible, i.e., the story of Abraham who is prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac to demonstrate his loyalty to God. By that time I had (and still have) the impression that this story, the story about the sacrifice of Isaac, was somehow of great importance for a deeper understanding of the nature of what we might call "religious terrorism."

Now, religious terrorism is a central topic in the work of Professor Guiora's son, Amos.² And the latter had always been crystal clear in his writings about the nature of religious terrorism: it is really "religious." That is definitely not a widely shared opinion. Many of the terrorism experts see, what is commonly called "religious terrorism," as really political,³ or as having nothing to do with any serious conviction at all (neither religious nor political). Terrorists are simply mad.

In order to gather material for his books, Amos had interviewed many convicted terrorists, and reflecting on firsthand experience he became convinced by the authenticity of their narratives. They really believe in what they do. And their beliefs are really religious.

¹ And published in 2010.

² See, e.g., Amos N. Guiora, *Freedom from Religion: Rights and National Security*, Terrorism and Global Justice Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 9: "Religion is used as a motivator to commit wide-scale acts of terrorism, to justify individual acts of violence behind closed doors, and promote hatred of the 'other.'" And further: "Religious extremism is fundamentally and existentially different from secular terrorism for it lays claim to acting in the name of the divine" (ibid., p. 10).

³ This is a view defended by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, Gallup Press, New York, 2007.

Why Religious Terrorism Is Really Religious

Just as Amos, I am convinced that we cannot simply reject or ignore what terrorists advance about their own motivations, because it does not fit in with our ideas of what religion *ought to be*.⁴ “To accept the facts as they are, however bitter or severe”⁵—that is what a real scientific attitude demands.

The proposition that religious terrorism has anything to do with religion tends to meet strong opposition. Part of that opposition is based on, simply, a division of labor among the scientific disciplines. A cultural anthropologist will be inclined to explain terrorism with the tools of *his* trade. He will see group behavior.⁶ A psychiatrist will approach terrorism with a special interest in the mind of the criminal. Are there specific personality features that distinguish terrorists from the ordinary citizens?⁷ I am inclined to presume that opposition toward the concept of “religious terrorism” goes deeper than that. What motivates people to vehemently oppose this idea of religious terrorism is the unease they feel when “a whole religion will be attacked.”

That last assumption is too hasty, of course. If you recognize that terrorists advance religious reasons for the things they do, this should only prod us to understand what they say, and reflect on what this might mean for the great religious traditions. And *if* there are certain elements in those traditions, which prove conducive to terrorist behavior, we can try to interpret them differently, or perhaps reject them more straightforwardly.

And that brings me to the central line of argument of this essay. It seems to me a fortuitous coincidence that in the work of the father we find much the son has been looking for. In the work of the father there is much spelled out which the son has sensed more intuitively and implicitly.⁸ In

⁴ Amos gives a hilarious account of his contacts with senior police officers in Great Britain who appeared decidedly insistent in *not* looking the tiger in the eye. See Amos N. Guiora, *Freedom from Religion: Rights and National Security*, Terrorism and Global Justice Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, pp. 2–3.

⁵ W.K. Clifford to Lady Pollock, September 26, 1871, quoted in W.K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, Volume I, Edited by Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, with an introduction by F. Pollock, Macmillan and Co., London, 1879, p. 49.

⁶ See Atran, Scott, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and what it Means to be Human*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, London, 2010.

⁷ John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

⁸ Which is, needless to say, a much more happy situation than the reverse, i.e., when the son more or less has to reject all his father has been teaching. See for an example of the last situation: Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments*, Peter Abbs (ed.), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1983 (1907).

other words, the work of Alexander Guiora on the philosophy of religion, or the theology of Judaism and Christianity (and I do not hesitate to qualify it as such), is very important for a proper understanding of what terrorism experts, including Amos, have been looking for: the lynchpin between terrorist violence and religion. But before I can explain this more fully, let me start with an analysis of what Alexander Guiora writes in the essays in this book on the essence of Judaism and Christianity.

On Christianity

One element in Guiora's⁹ theological or religious philosophical work is expounding for us the intolerant attitude that pervades much Christian thought. Now *nota bene*, this is not about individual Christians, of course. It is about Christian *thought*. In "The Language of the Gospels" Guiora speaks of the *Justizmord* of that "gentle Jewish teacher from the Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth." Guiora speculates what would have happened if the spirit of universalism had prevailed over rabbinical rigor. Another interesting question is what would have happened if after the catastrophe of 70 CE a leader of the stature of Saul or Tarsus had arisen in Israel. The most fateful idea in the history of Christian thought, an idea that has troubled Christian-Jewish relationships for centuries, is the idea that Christianity is the "fulfillment of Judaism" that supersedes it. Alexander Guiora says: "Let it be said, here and now, clear and loud and in no uncertain terms: those who cleave to that position are no different than fundamentalist rabbinical Judaism."

In what follows Guiora gives a sharp criticism of the manuscripts that have become known to us as the scriptural tradition. His judgment is very critical. "We don't possess a copy of the original version of the Septuagint. That was copied, redacted, copied, and redacted again by successive Christian copyists and editors until eventually it has reached the form we have before us today." So it is "not a reliable source, it is flawed."¹⁰

A leading idea in that whole process was also the (again fateful) idea that Christianity had to separate itself from the source, i.e., Judaism. And the Church triumphant became "militantly anti-Jewish," even "demonizing the Jews."

⁹ In this contribution when I refer to "Guiora," I meant the father. When I speak of Amos, I refer to the son.

¹⁰ As the theologian Bart Ehrman has pointed out in Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, HarperCollins, New York, 2007; Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2004.

Guiora's critical history of the first two phases of the monotheist creed¹¹ ends with a recommendation: "My suggestion is that Christians, to make their salvationist-universalist religion more meaningful, need to rediscover Jesus the Jew and the Jewish roots of Christianity."

You do not have to believe in Guiora's last mentioned recommendation to acknowledge that his analysis of the intellectual roots of the conflict between Christianity and Judaism hits hard. A negative attitude toward the Jews, or, as Guiora writes, "demonizing the Jews," is not some sort of attitude problem. It is not something that can be solved by good intentions; it has deep roots in Christian theology.

This view on Christianity will come as a shock to many Christian readers. Basically, Christianity is founded on a mistake, a fateful mistake, that is. The whole sad history of anti-Semitism (and now I use my own words and I cannot hold Guiora responsible for the way I phrase the matter here) is intricately bound up with the rise of Christianity. This is, of course, a very controversial topic. The European Court in Strasbourg even had to judge whether it is legally permitted to express so clearly what is wrong with Christian theology. This happened in *Giniewski v. France* (2006).

On January 4, 1994, the Paris newspaper *Le Quotidien* published an article by an Austrian historian named Paul Giniewski (1926–2011).¹² The title of the article was "The Obscurity of Error." The article contained an analysis of the papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* ("The Splendor of Truth" 1993). In his article Giniewski contended, "many Christians have recognized that scriptural anti-Judaism and the doctrine of 'fulfillment' of the Old Covenant in the New led to anti-Semitism and prepared the ground in which the idea and implementation of Auschwitz took seed."

This analysis was contested by an organization with the name (and this name is revealing in itself) *Alliance générale contre le racisme et pour le respect de l'identité française et chrétienne* [General Alliance Against Racism and for Respect of the French and Christian Identity].¹³ This organization, we can safely assume, tries to defend the French identity. French identity is apparently sought in (or considered to be synonymous with) Christianity. The organization also seeks to conduct its defense by

¹¹ I use this term despite Guiora's reservations against it. Guiora considers the differences between on the one hand Islam and Christianity and Judaism on the other more important than the similarities.

¹² Giniewski is the author of dozens of books on the history of anti-Semitism and the Israeli-Arab conflict. See Paul Giniewski, *Le contentieux Israélo-Arabe*, Cheminements, Paris, 2007.

¹³ See for a critical evaluation of the work of that organization: Charb, *Lettre aux escrocs de l'islamophobie qui font le jeu des racistes*, Les Échappés, Paris, 2015, p. 65.

judicial means, because it brought proceedings against the newspaper and against the author of the article. This was done on the charge that the article by Giniewski contained racially defamatory statements about the Christian community. Domestic courts convicted Giniewski, but the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg did not. The Court ruled unanimously that, by his conviction on this charge, Giniewski's freedom of expression had been unduly violated.

In the Court's view Giniewski's words did not amount to accusing Christians and Catholics in general of being responsible for the Nazi massacres. And therefore Christians were not victims of defamation on account of their religious beliefs. The Court also affirmed that Giniewski had tried to develop an argument about a specific doctrine and its possible links with the Holocaust. Doing this could be considered as a contribution to an ongoing debate. And "it is an integral part of freedom of expression to seek historical truth." Besides, Giniewski's article did not incite hatred or disrespect, nor did it cast doubt in any way on clearly established historical facts.

So, fortunately, the right to critically assess Christianity for its attitude toward Judaism exists in Europe. And rightly so. The idea that Religion II supersedes and cancels Religion I, is not an idea that has "helped mankind."¹⁴ It contains the seeds of catastrophe. Making this clear is not only an important right, as the European Court in Strasbourg upholds, but also an intellectual and moral duty.

On Judaism

But Alexander Guiora is not only critical about Christianity; he also makes some strong comments on the foundations of Judaism. The first thing to be noted in his "Reflections on the God of Israel from *Aqedat Yitshak* to *Aqedat Yeshu* from the Binding of Isaac to the Sacrifice of Jesus" is that Guiora embraces the projection theory of religion. He follows Xenophanes¹⁵ and Feuerbach¹⁶ in saying: "In my view God was created by man, and thus the evolution of the God concept (Israel in our case) reflects the evolution of the society and culture that have created it."

¹⁴ See on this Bertrand Russell, "Ideas That Have Harmed Mankind" (1946), "Ideas That Have Helped Mankind" (1946), in Bertrand Russell, *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*, Al Seckel (ed.), Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1986, pp. 289–325.

¹⁵ W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, Macmillan, London and New York, 1960 (1920), pp. 40ff.

¹⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Nachwort von Karl Löwith, Philipp Reclam Jun., Stuttgart, 1978 (1841).

Needless to say, this idea is not only unacceptable for Christians, but also for many Jews and Muslims. Therefore, it cannot come as a surprise when Guiora writes that his position is that of an “outside observer (not even a *participant* observer), without any allegiances or confessional commitments other than to the truth as I see it.” He says: “Sine ira et studio but without flinching to look the tiger in the eye.”¹⁷ Guiora even writes that his words will be likely “to offend almost everybody.”¹⁸ The claim that man created God and not *vice versa* also has consequences for Guiora’s ideas on interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels. Guiora says, and here comes one of my favorite sentences in this book: “I am *not* yet another Johnny-come-lately exegete trying to squeeze fresh hermeneutical meaning from scraps of biblical texts taken out of context, disregarding linguistic development, timeline, and locale, or utilizing dubious exegetical instruments...” What follows is a powerful criticism of many passages from the Hebrew Bible where the Lord God declares he will visit the “iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation” (Exodus 24:6–7).

Central to Guiora’s criticism of the Hebrew Bible is the story we discussed in our e-mail conversation in 2009 and which appears in this essay as the *Aqedat Yitshak*: the sacrifice of Isaac. The story has a happy ending, Guiora says, because (and this is an unexpected way to phrase it) “the storyteller recoiled from the very proposition, couldn’t bring himself to conclude it to the terrible end.” So a sacrificial ram was introduced as some sort of a *deus ex machina*. The story is, as Guiora says, one of the “constitutive legends of the nascent Israel.”

¹⁷ Also a popular attitude taken by the son, by Amos, as those who know him well will acknowledge. See, e.g., Amos N. Guiora, *Freedom from Religion: Rights and National Security*, Terrorism and Global Justice Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. x: “I have decided that in order to make my case as compelling and convincing as possible I must look ‘the tiger in the eye.’” See also, *ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

¹⁸ Not only the *right* to offend should be claimed, but also the *duty* to offend when there is a conflict between truth and generally accepted lies or widely spread ignorance. What marks the great scientist, but also the great social reformer, is that they are always on the side of a choice for truth, for looking the tiger in the eye, never for formulations which smother truth. Some valid points are raised by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “Defending the Right to Offend,” *The Worldpost*, April 20, 2015. This is, again, a stance that is supported by the European Court in *Handyside v. United Kingdom* (1976), where the Court decides that Article 10 (freedom of speech) is not only applicable to “information” or “ideas” that are favorably received, or regarded as inoffensive, or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that “offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population. Such are the demands of that pluralism, tolerance, and broadmindedness without which there is no ‘democratic society.’”

And that brings us to one of the constitutive legends of Christianity, i.e., the Aqedat Yeshu: the idea, according to John 3:16, that “God so much loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes may not perish but have eternal life” (NRSV). Guiora:

It is a foundational tenet of faith with most Christians that God so loved mankind that he sacrificed his only begotten son to atone for all their sins. Sins against whom? Sins against himself. And to atone for sins committed against him he sacrifices his own son. There’s no deus ex machina to save Jesus from completing the terrible aqeda, the terrible Justizmord.

This passage could have been taken from Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*¹⁹ or from Christopher Hitchens’s *God is not Great*,²⁰ or from *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine.²¹ All these authors have, just like Guiora, severely criticized the notion of vicarious redemption. But Guiora is entirely original, and accordingly surprising, when he compares the *Aqedat Yitshak* and the *Aqedat Yeshu* and spells out what this means for an assessment of the moral content of Christianity in comparison to Judaism. He says: “As a matter of fact, the Crucifixion is a hugely retrogressive step in relation to the story of the Aqedat Yitshak.”

That is indeed a remarkable difference: Isaac was spared, Jesus was not. That means that from an outsiders’ perspective the conclusion is hard to avoid (these are my words) that Christianity is a deterioration compared to Judaism. The founding myth of Judaism is cruel suggestion. The founding myth of Christianity is a cruel act. About Christianity Guiora says: “it is his own son he sacrifices to himself to please himself. Monstrous.”

From a nonreligious perspective one cannot but agree wholeheartedly with Guiora. And one can also feel thankful that he spells out so clearly what are objections that many intuitively feel about the foundational myths of both Judaism and Christianity. What will surprise some, though, is that Guiora does not seem to reject the whole heritage of the religious tradition. He speaks of “an incomparable heritage unparalleled in human

¹⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, paperback edition, Black Swan, Transworld Publishers, London, 2006, pp. 286–287.

²⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Twelve, New York and Boston, 2007, pp. 208–210.

²¹ Alfred Ayer, in his book on Paine, writes: “One thing which is clear to me ... is that whichever view one takes of retribution in general, there is no justification of any sort for the principle of vicarious atonement, and this fact, as Paine perceived, is itself sufficient to demolish the claim of Christianity to be even a beneficent myth.” See A.J. Ayer, *Thomas Paine*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, p. 146. See also Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 1794, in Thomas Paine, *Collected Writings*, The Library of America, New York, 1995, pp. 665–885.

thought,” *viz.* the book, the Bible. Here Judaism and Christianity share a common heritage and this separates them from Islam. Guiora rejects what he calls the “mantra” of the “three Abrahamic religions.” So not the Quran but the Bible remains the central focus of his attention. And, what is more important, in a positive way: “Can you imagine an intellectual and spiritual existence without the Book?”

The question is meant as a rhetorical question, to be sure. But for humanists the answer is less clear. They will say: “Of course, we can imagine an intellectual and spiritual existence without the Book.”

One of the authors who answered this question affirmatively was Susan Stebbing (1885–1943), the first female professor of philosophy in Britain. In *Ideals and Illusions* (1941)²² Stebbing listed “spiritual excellences” that were not based on any religious conviction:

- Love for other human beings;
- Delight in creative activities of all kinds;
- Respect for truth and the satisfaction in learning to know what is true about the world and about ourselves;
- Loyalty to other human beings;
- Generosity of thought and sympathy with those who suffer, and hatred of cruelty and other evils;
- Delight in the beauty of nature and in art; and to have experience of pain and of forgoing what would be good for oneself in order that the needs of others may be met.²³

According to Stebbing this is all totally independent from religion.²⁴

But, of course, this does not deny that the Bible is in many respects a magnificent book. No one can deny this, and we do not have to. But it is a book that also imbibes an attitude toward the basis of morals that proves highly problematic in the time in which we are living. That brings me to the beginning of this essay: the relationship between Guiora’s analysis of the essence of Judaism and Christianity and Amos’s ideas about the

²² L. Susan Stebbing, *Ideals and Illusions*, with an introduction by A.E. Heath, Watts & Co., London, 1948 (1941).

²³ Stebbing, *Ideals and Illusions*, pp. 29–30.

²⁴ See for other testimonies of literature which are spiritually uplifting without being religious: William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, A Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1993; A.C. Grayling, *The Good Book: A Secular Bible*, Conceived, Selected, Redacted, Arranged, Worked, and in Part Written by A.C. Grayling, Bloomsbury, London, 2011; Peter Singer and Renate Singer, *The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics Through Literature*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2005; Andre Comte-Sponville, *L’esprit de l’athéisme: Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2006.

religiousness of religious violence. What does the Bible say about violence? And how does that throw light on the contemporary problems with terrorist violence? Does the Bible teach us something about why the Kouachi brothers gunned down the whole editorial board of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015? About why Mohammed Bouyeri murdered Theo van Gogh? About why the British soldier Lee Rigby was hacked to death in a street in London? About, well the stories are endless, are they not?²⁵

And the world looks at these things with utter amazement. Politicians all carefully refrain using the “R” word or the “I” word and speak about “horrible deeds,” “extremism,” “monsters”—nowhere a tiger in sight to look in the eye. And yet, I think, the key to our understanding of this type of violence is in the essays in this book by Guiora. It is his analysis of the sacrifice of Isaac or rather the willingness to sacrifice Isaac. The *Aqedat Yitshak* is the key to a proper understanding of contemporary religious terrorism.

Aqedat Yitshak

To understand religious terrorism we first have to listen to what the terrorists themselves are saying. Not many people are prepared to do this. Amos did. But he is one of the rare exceptions. Most people do not listen to terrorists; and if they do (or claim to do this), they very soon hear what they want to hear; that this is all about land, about foreign occupation, about the West being “arrogant,” etc. But if we listen more carefully we very often hear that the terrorists are not so much ruthless people as people who are very much convinced that they have a divine mission. They think—like Plato—the world around us is just an illusion. The real world is still to come. We have to prepare ourselves for that new world and therefore they are not afraid to die. Our laws are not their laws. Our state is not their state. They simply do not think that our moral judgments have any real basis. The only thing that counts is implementing the will of God, whatever that amounts to.

Where did we hear that before?

Indeed, this is the mentality of Abraham, prepared to sacrifice his son for the sole reason that God commanded it. Abraham would not only have sacrificed his son, but also his wife, his house, his flock, himself—he would have done what every true believer is supposed to do, i.e., we have here an unconditional loyalty to the one and only God.

²⁵ And not only stories connected to radical Islam (although they proliferate). See on Yigal Amir killing Yitzhak Rabin: Amos N. Guiora, *Freedom from Religion: Rights and National Security*, Terrorism and Global Justice Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, pp. 11, 33, 77.

I hope I am not needlessly provocative when I say that the terrorists are the children of Abraham. That does not exclude, of course, that the God of Israel, during the course of the development of the biblical story, has changed over time.²⁶ That may be the case, as also Guiora makes clear in his essays in this book. But the contemporary children of Abraham are much more impressed by Abraham willing to sacrifice his son than by Abraham discussing with God about Sodom and Gomorrah.

What the world is confronted with nowadays is a “back-to-Abraham” movement, back to a man who wants to sacrifice all he loves for the one and only God.

There is an enormous and almost desperate quest for the root causes of religious terrorism, but in my view it lies there, under our very noses. And it is splendidly analyzed by Guiora in his thoughts on the *Aqedat Yitshak*. And here there is, perhaps, a small difference between the *Aqedat Yitshak* and the *Aqedat Yeshu* which make the Christian story a little bit more acceptable. Jesus was prepared to have himself sacrificed. Abraham was prepared to sacrifice *someone else*. Abraham was prepared to kill for the sake of his own phantasies; Jesus was prepared to die for them.

I think that we will not make headway with countering religious terrorism as long as we do not give this the attention it deserves. Not only is religious terrorism really religious, it also goes back to a mentality of religious heteronomy. What we have to do is raise children who see the vicissitudes of the biblical idea (both Jewish and Christian), that following God’s commands is a sure guide for ethical living.

²⁶ Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, Boston, and London, 2009.