



Sunday Forums May 2026



Living Into Jesus' Inclusive Call: What Can Progressive Christianity Be?

May 3

Heschel's "No Religion is an Island" Is Still Important 60 Years Later

Presenter: Dr. David Lee

Abraham Heschel, Jewish philosopher/ rabbi/mystic/social activist, believed strongly that religions could and should coexist. His idea of "depth theology" meant that all religions begin with an awareness of human inadequacy while seeking to explain and rise above it. His lecture at Union Theological Seminary in 1965 primarily addressed Jewish-Christian relations, and his comments are even more pertinent now in a world that is "post-modern" and "neo-liberal." What is God telling us in 2026?

May 10

From Liberation Theology to the "Nones" Are Alright: Is Christianity Too Political or Not Political Enough?

Presenter: Father Curt Cadorette

Father Cadorette began his career as a Maryknoll priest, serving for two decades in Peru. There he made friends with Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founders of Liberation Theology. This doctrine states that Christ's message originated in concern for the well-being of the poor and powerless. Dr. Cadorette has written three books and several dozen articles on Gutierrez, Liberation Theology and the social justice traditions of Catholicism.

May 17

Theology or Practice? The Art of Being Progressive

Presenter: Pastor Kristina Hansen

What is progressive theology? Is it something you "just have?" Is it something that develops over time? Join PK as she shares with us her personal journey and insights into what progressive theology looks like in theory and practice.

Sundays, 9:45AM—The Shaw Room



Heschel's 1965 Talk, "No Religion is an Island"

Heschel's 1965 talk, "No Religion is an Island"

Dr. David Lee
Sunday Forum
Downtown United Presbyterian Church
May 3, 2026

Could we begin with a quick prayer? Dear God, we gather to hear your calling, not only in worship services, but also in our formal and informal groups. Please be with us here this hour as we seek to learn how powerful and wonderful your presence is. Help us not to forget that you are always there when we remember to turn to you. Please continue to be present to comfort our afflictions, but we also ask that you continue to afflict our consciences and inspire us to action. Amen

Good morning. First of all, I want to thank all of you for making this community what it is. From the first time I appeared at Downtown, in 2011 at the invitation of Doug Potter, I have valued the safety and generosity of this place. It tries to be inviting and inclusive. It is a place where we can "be ourselves" without feeling judged. It is not perfect, and it has to be careful not to rest on its laurels. In looking at my comments and slides, I guess I am wondering how this place might be more than just a "safe harbor" to find comfort in. How can it also be a safe harbor to return to after choppy seas of confrontation and challenge? Many of you are not content to stay in a safe harbor of course, and are frequently venturing to challenge the world. But we also need to confront and challenge ourselves, in order to be prepared to challenge and confront the world outside DUPC.

Today I would like for us to begin a conversation about what it means to subscribe to a "progressive Christian theology." And I suppose an important question is how do Christian theology, Christian ethics and Christian mysticism align to support a social justice mission? There are many ways to support social justice. What do Christian ideas, values and experiences bring to the conversation? We will be continuing this exploration next week with Curt Cadorette, and in two weeks with PK our pastor. I am only one voice in this conversation though, and we need to keep the conversations going.

What does “progressive” Christianity bring to conversations about social justice?

- Who was Abraham Joshua Heschel?
- “No Religion is an Island” (UTS, 1965)
 - All religions begin with awareness of Something Else, and then try to relate to That.
 - The Abrahamic religions share understanding of a God who cares how humans live.
 - Human dignity is God-given because human beings are created in God’s image.
 - Humankind has freedom and agency; God needs a partner in the world.
 - Justice and righteousness
 - Love God; love one’s neighbor
 - Inclusiveness is always God’s will.
 - Many spiritualities, many perspectives on “God.”
- How can “progressive” Christian theology confront:
 - Christian Nationalism?
 - Nihilism?
- Social justice is God’s will – how do we respond?

What does “progressive” Christianity bring to conversations about social justice? As you have heard me say before perhaps, quoting this hero of mine, Abraham Joshua Heschel, it is in the process of struggling to find the answers to important questions that we can re-vitalize religion in our own time. This is the question I am trying to introduce and answer today. What does “progressive” Christianity bring to conversations about social justice?

I like to imagine that the perspectives gathered because of my age and experiences might lend some wisdom to the conversation. I am not a theologian though. I am bringing perspectives from my own lived experiences and studies, perspectives that have helped me increase my understanding of the human condition. (And in fact we all bring perspectives to enhance the conversations in this congregation and this community. No one knows the whole Truth.)

But first we need to ask questions or know what questions to address. And one of the critical tenets I hold is that the understanding of God’s relationship to humanity evolves (the so-called answers change), because mankind changes over time. What is stable? What has to change?

And you might notice, I said that it is the relationship that changes ... : it is a human conceit to want to believe that human understanding might “define” God, especially if the beliefs are stated as if they would remain true once and for all.

I will first spend just a few minutes reviewing Dr. Heschel’s biography. I wanted to take Rabbi Heschel’s speech at Union Theological Seminary in 1965 as a starting place, a springboard.

First of all it is beautifully written (there is actually an audio recording available online in the archives of the Jewish Theological Seminar – I will include the link in my text https://makor.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/delivery/01JTS_INST:01JTS/1267592550007706). But reading the text is a pleasure, because of how well he reaches the mind and the heart.

Next, his theological starting points are prophetic and challenging. His search for explanations and common ground between Christians and Jews is marvelous – he proposes that so-called “depth theology” can be a source of common understanding and explanation. “Depth theology” is born from deep sources of human awareness and yearning.

All religions begin with awareness of Something Else, and then they try to describe and explain that awareness, and how to relate to it. I will describe some of his thinking, but it will be only a skimming of the surface of his rich understanding and description.

Dr. Heschel says first that God created humankind in their own image. All are created equal; all contain the image of God; all also have freedom and agency.

The Abrahamic God is a god of pathos – God cares about humanity’s actions, They care about justice and righteousness. God needs a partner in the world – humankind, holy of holies in the Abrahamic tradition, that which was created in God’s image – is that partner. Loving God, loving neighbor are part of that partnership. This God sent the Law to the Jews to guide them, and God entered human history as Jesus to bring the message to non-Jews. Other cultures have other perspectives though. Heschel said that if Jerusalem had not been in the land of Canaan and Palestine, Judaism and Christianity might have evolved differently, as they would have intersected with different cultures than the Greek and Egyptian. It is still one God.

But I also want to move beyond the academic brilliance of Dr. Heschel. Indeed he himself said that he had to move out of the study to active engagement with the world in order to be aligned with God’s purposes. I suspect and hope that Dr. Cadorette and Pastor Kristina will send a similar message.

It is also troubling to many that Christian Nationalism has gained such influence. So I will spend time, and use Dr. Heschel’s words to bolster challenges to Christian Nationalism – which is the most modern example of using religion to separate and divide. After all, Rabbi Heschel was instrumental in the writing of *Nostra aetate*, the declaration in 1965 that the Catholic church would no longer seek conversion of the Jews. The foundational concept (*Nostra aetate* means “in our time”) is in Heschel’s

words, “in this eon, diversity of religions is the will of God.” What can be a theological basis to confront Christian Nationalism? (Of course, theology is only one challenge to confronting that movement. There are also psychological and political reasons that help explain the rise of Christian Nationalism.)

Heschel in his lifetime was also aware that Nihilism was a challenge to “religion.” Human cultures have always had religious practices and beliefs – culturally based, they generally invoke some kind of superhuman powers to bring about good things and to manage or prevent bad things. Increased secularization in Heschel’s time had challenged the reasons for religious practice and belief. That process has only grown since then. We know that in declining church memberships, and with rising numbers of the Nones, those without religious affiliations.

There is a growing prevalence of the attitude that human experience has no overarching meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. No one living in the 1960s could have imagined the realities, potentials and pitfalls of our time: no one a mere lifetime ago could have imagined the scientific, medical, economic, political, and social realities we now have.

But we live in a period of growing Disorder, of declining trust and function in traditions and institutions. Is it therefore good enough to continue relying on our scientific, medical, economic, political, and social realities and potentials, without needing to believe in or search for meaning, purpose, and the sources of value? Nihilism is the belief that meaning, purpose and values do not have intrinsic origins. At best, humans individually and collectively have to invent them. I have some thoughts that might help us confront this problem, too, that of nihilism.

In all of this, we have to be careful to remember that you and I are a privileged choir, generally privileged enough to have the luxuries of education, income, physical security, and peace of mind. My ruminations are made possible by those conditions – sometimes the mere thought is privileged. Transforming these ideas into just and kind actions requires motivation, and transforming ideas into lasting cultural change requires a different set of skills – political skills. But I hope that we can use these ideas to strengthen our defense of inclusiveness in the presence of individual and social diversity, and toward the shaping of just and equitable societies in the local and wider world. We have to keep asking, What does God want of us in 2026?

As I introduce his words to you, I will add my comments, which I believe will help place his comments in their historical context, and which should prompt some reflections on how they are still true now, two generations later.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)

- Born into the legacy of seven generations of Hasidic rabbis in Poland.
- Went to Berlin in 1927 to study philosophy.
 - Ph.D. thesis became *The Prophets*.
- Persecuted by Nazis. Able to leave Poland 6 weeks before start of WWII.
- Eventually at Jewish Theological Seminary (1946-1972).
- Became friends with Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King.
- Spoke out against racism, Vietnam War, treatment of Russian Jews; supported Medicare, supported interreligious dialogue.
- Theology that reached not only minds, but also hearts.
 - "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."
 - "The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference."

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in 1907 in Poland. By the end of WWII that whole culture had been eradicated. He was the son of a rabbi, who was a son of a rabbi, going back seven generations, including his mother's side. He was recognized as a prodigy at a young age. But he wanted to know more of the world, so he left Warsaw in 1927 to study philosophy at the University of Berlin. In 1933 he had completed his dissertation but it took another 3 years to get it published due to Nazi laws. That dissertation became *The Prophets*, a landmark book on the nature of the relationship between God and humanity. He was arrested and deported back to Poland in 1938. To escape the evils that he could see coming, he applied for several years for a visa to study abroad. It came in 1939, from Hebrew Union College, a center of Reformed Judaism. Six weeks after he left Poland, Germany invaded Poland. He eventually lost his immediate relatives in the Holocaust, as well as many colleagues. He never returned to those lands.

He was unhappy at HUC, and tried for several years to have an appointment at Jewish Theological Seminary, a center of Conservative Judaism. There he stayed until his death in 1972. He wrote many books and articles in several languages. He spoke at many academic events (in English, his sixth language). By the 1960s he realized that he had to come out of the study and join with activists if he were to be true to his sense of God's calling.

He became lifelong friends with Reinhold Niebuhr and delivered Niebuhr's eulogy in 1971. He met Martin Luther King in 1963 at the first conference of interreligious cooperation to confront racism. They worked together, marched together, and would have celebrated the Passover Seder together on 4/12/1968.

It is said that his theology reached not only minds, but also hearts. His speeches and writings contain many quotable aphorisms. Here are just two of them. "In a free society,

some are guilty, but all are responsible.” “The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference.”

“No Religion is an Island” – opening

I speak as a member of a congregation whose founder was Abraham, and the name of my rabbi is Moses.

I speak as a person who was able to leave Warsaw, the city in which I was born, just six weeks before the disaster began. My destination was New York, it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. I am a brand plucked from the fire, in which my people was burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory, and on which so much else was consumed: the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in the God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly two thousand years.

Let's experience Rabbi Heschel's words.

[I speak as a member of a congregation ...]

Dr. Heschel begins with his “identity statement.” He is Jewish, very Jewish and proudly so. But ... as we will soon see, that beginning is not a statement of exclusiveness; it is a statement of how he starts to understand God, not how he insists others should see God.

His identity is tied to a community – a congregation founded by Abraham. We should recall that the God of Abraham is at the very least the God of Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. He recognizes the depth and continuity of his tradition. It reaches much further back than the “modern” world – “our” world of Enlightenment sensibility, the rise of secularism, and the rise of scientific rationalism, leading to where we are today.

His rabbi, the teacher of wisdom and ethics, is Moses – the giver of the Law, the greatest of the Jewish prophets, men who mediated between God and humanity. Later we will see how Heschel reminds us that the evolutionary tree of the Abrahamic religions never means its offshoots – Christianity and Islam – did or should replace/supplant Judaism's place in history or allegiance. The traditions claiming Jesus and Mohammed as their originators evolved differently, but their God is still one God. In the Abrahamic traditions, there is a God who exists as the source of spiritual yearning, and who cares how humans treat each other. In other traditions, there is a Mystery that exists as a source of spiritual yearning.

I would submit that somehow there is a widespread sense of spiritual yearning. Freud called religions “a universal delusion.” We should find it notable (and also remarkable and wonderful) that such delusions are so universal – in human beings and human

cultures.

[I speak as a person ...]

Heschel is a person who knows loss and sorrow, despair and suffering. Cornel West reminds us that “the condition of truth is to let suffering speak.” We know of Auschwitz and Hiroshima as examples of the callousness and depravity of power, anger, delusion, and Evil – Evil is that which separates God from men and men from each other (God from humanity, and human beings from each other). Heschel knew it as a loss of family members and friends [each human being created in the divine image of God], of Eastern European communities and whole traditions [they held a secret and a power from their attachment to the Bible], of faith in God [where was God in the extermination and labor camps?]

Suffering and sorrow are part of human experience. In Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “Kindness” she says, “Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, / you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. / You must wake up with sorrow. / You must speak to it till your voice / catches the thread of all sorrows / and you see the size of the cloth.” Heschel knew more than most, “the size of the cloth.” And he is still able to pass through Tears, pass through Silence, and then to believe, to know that there is a Song that still resonates and can be sung.

During his lifetime, Rabbi Heschel was able to move John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, William Sloane Coffin, Pope Paul VI. The brand plucked from the fire was able to kindle new moral fire then. Can he move us too? (Or are we too calloused or distracted to be moved?)

“In this eon diversity of religions is the will of God.”

Religions, I repeat, true to their own convictions, disagree profoundly and are in opposition to one another on matters of doctrine. However, if we accept the prophet’s thesis that they all worship one God, even without knowing it, if we accept the principle that the majesty of God transcends the dignity of religion, should we not regard a divergent religion as His Majesty’s loyal opposition? However, does not every religion maintain the claim to be true, and is not truth exclusive?

The ultimate truth is not capable of being fully and adequately expressed in concepts and words. The ultimate truth is about the situation that pertains between God and man. “The Torah speaks in the language of man.” Revelation is always an accommodation to the capacity of man. No two minds are alike, just as no two faces are alike. The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding.

[Religions, I repeat, true to their own convictions, ...]

One has to recall the situation of “religion” in the 1960s. After the horrors of World War II (of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, as Heschel labeled it), and in the shadow of nuclear

annihilation, the virtues of Christian values were assumed, but so was awareness that racism was a problem in America; and there were effective arguments that maybe God was “dead”: Communism’s rise included strongly anti-religious beliefs; and Existentialism’s attitude arose from the experiences that God must have been absent in mankind’s time of trial. In 1966 TIME magazine had its notorious cover asking “Is God dead?”

In the meantime, Rabbi Heschel is reclaiming Judaism’s place in history: he examines the sources of religious belief (we might call it spiritual belief): “Religion is an answer to man’s ultimate questions.” That is Depth Theology. Beginning with and never letting go of the awareness of God in human history, he reminded Christians that the one God they worship is the God of Abraham and Isaac, who spoke through the prophets of Israel, and who was abandoned by the Western world, culminating in Nazism: the Third Reich was the culmination of centuries (not only decades) of Christian anti-semitism.

His philosophical publications in the 1950s examined the role of the Abrahamic God in human history: God is, God cares, God created humans because He (They) needed a partner in the world. Heschel’s writings and presence were the foundation of a deep and lasting friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr. They were also the foundation of his relationship with Martin Luther King.

Vatican II began to meet in 1962 to address how the Catholic Church might address modern problems of religion. As one of the Jewish representatives to the Council, Heschel insisted strenuously that the doctrine of conversion of Jews to Christianity must be abolished. In 1965 the document *Nostra aetate* (In our time) was published, and begins, “In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different people are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions ...” “the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in other religions. It might seem obvious now, but in 1965 it was very controversial. [4:00]

Different religions are different answers to the same question: What is the relationship between God and man?

Rabbi Heschel insists that religion is about relationships, particularly the relationship between God and man (God and humanity). Theology might be about trying (an impossible task) to define what or who God is. But Religion – how the beliefs, values and rituals are lived – is a matter of how individuals, communities and cultures see themselves in relationship. And among the questions is whether the relationship is “real” to its practitioners.

[The ultimate truth is not capable of being fully and adequately expressed in concepts and words ...]

Religion is a means, not the end.

Religion is a means, not the end. It becomes idolatrous when regarded as an end in itself. Over and above all being stands the Creator and Lord of history, He who transcends all. To equate religion and God is idolatry.

Does not the all-inclusiveness of God contradict the exclusiveness of any particular religion? The prospect of all men embracing one form of religion remains an eschatological hope. What about here and now? Is it not blasphemous to say: I alone have all the truth and the grace, and all those who differ live in darkness, and are abandoned by the grace of God?

Speaking still with the challenge of Christian-Jewish relations in mind, Dr. Heschel goes on to declare: “Religion is a means, not the end.” (The Buddhists use a similar saying in fact, when they say, religions are all like fingers pointing at the moon, but are never the moon itself !)

[Read]

More on “idolatry”

From Rabbi Heschel’s 1963 speech, “Religion and Race”

“What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol. Faith in God is not simply an afterlife-insurance policy. Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy.”

Earlier, Rabbi Heschel had addressed the relationship of religion to race. That 1963

speech, “Religion and Race” had the memorable opening lines: “At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go ... The outcome of that summit has not come to an end.”

That conference was in January 1963 in Chicago. Dr. Heschel opened the first plenary session with this speech. Prior to that he had not met Martin Luther King. It is said that this speech helped King deepen his appreciation and defense of the moral basis of his work. It also began their friendship. Dr. and Mrs. King would have celebrated Passover with the Heschel’s in 1968, were it not for the tragedy of April 4.

In that speech, we see these lines: [Read]

God created one Adam, not different colors of mankind. “From one single man all men are descended.” The theological implications of that beginning are profound. In the 1963 speech, the issue was racial bigotry. But we also see that Dr. Heschel also had in mind religious bigotry.

“To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God’s beloved child.”

Summary to this point:

- Rabbi Heschel was speaking in 1965 of the need for dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, at a time when many Christians considered Jews to be followers of an outdated religion.
- His “depth theology” defined the common ground from which religions begin: that there is a “God-shaped hole” in human lives.
 - All religions are historical-cultural answers to questions about the relationship between humankind and “God”.
- No religions contain the whole truth.
 - To imagine that a religion has all the answers is human, and an act of (human) self-delusion.
- All this may be fine for seminarians. What about us, “the man on the street”?

Summarizing to this point:

1) Rabbi Heschel was speaking in 1965 of the need for dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, at a time when many Christians considered Jews to be followers of an outdated religion. Western imperialism in fact felt that “their brand” of Christianity had or should largely replace all religions. That attitude is still present.

Instead, Dr. Heschel offered a different viewpoint on what religion does and why persons and cultures are religious. His “depth theology” defined the common ground from which religions begin: that there is a “God-shaped hole” in human lives. ...

Furthermore, “in this eon diversity of religions is the will of God.” No human religions contain the whole truth. Yet there remains the all-too-human tendency to elevate themselves over others (Us over Them). Self-delusion is all-too-common.

And delusions of grandeur regarding religion become idolatrous, when one remembers that each human being is valued and beloved.

At this point, I should point out that Heschel’s eloquence and insights were not universally acclaimed or even well-received.

He taught at JTS (Jewish Theological Seminary) where he insisted that the academic study of scriptures and rituals can get too esoteric and separated from the search for a living and personal relationship with God. That did not make him friends. At the same time, his insistence that Jewish traditions carried historical and spiritual significance made him an uncomfortable gadfly to Reformed Jews – Rabbi Heschel criticized their practice and understanding as shallow and incomplete. His overtures to the Pope were viewed by some as too impractical, and even self-promoting.

So we can readily note that wonderful ideas will always find challenges when put into practice. His work is so erudite, so wide and deep that it takes persistence and training to fully appreciate the themes and variations. What I have tried to do is to use this speech to remind us that the Judeo-Christian (the Abrahamic) tradition is deep and wide and valuable. Equality of religions before God, celebration of the Diversity of humanity and Creation, and Inclusiveness of all of humanity – these tenets did not originate with the Enlightenment. They have their moral grounding in the nature of what God expects of mankind: God is, God cares, God needs a partner.

Expertise can be questioned. It is easy to raise questions about whether to “believe” in religions given the horrific roles that religions have had in history: their violence, greed, tribalism and hierarchical history cannot be denied.

But I would submit that that does not negate the theology, only the practices. Heschel insisted that theologians have an important role to play, and interreligious dialogue can lead to important insights about God. As he wrote, one does not ask the man in the street about the nature of the universe. You don’t get a very accurate picture of God from them either.

Theology: Limitations and challenges

- Conflicting theologies
- Fundamentalism
- Ethics. Secular humanism.
- Mysticism
- Nihilism

But as with so much else, there is often a wide gulf between theory and practice. Moses lived maybe 3500 years ago, and The Law he gave to the Jews could not be honored consistently: the Jewish people, being human, have repeatedly failed to live justly and righteously within their borders. Jesus lived about 2000 years ago, preaching universal love and belonging. And there is perhaps even less sense now that human societies could ever co-exist in universal love and belonging.

We do not have time enough to understand why religious beliefs repeatedly fail to live up to their ideals. Theologies do tend to conflict rather than cooperate. Fundamentalist ideas (of whatever type) appeal to the simplicity of an imagined and established past to justify a return to that past.

In our age, Western secular humanism seeks to avoid invoking beliefs involving supernatural forces: somehow it must be possible to find a common, non-religious ground for ethical behaviors. The experiences of the European religious wars, the disorienting experiences of The Plague and the “discovery” of new worlds with vastly different cultures, the discovery of natural laws in Nature – these led to Enlightenment ideas about the importance of Reason and the search for non-religious universal truths in human nature. The totalitarian experiences of the 20th century proved that Reason alone could not bring peace on earth. The fragmentation of “postmodern” experiences have led to questions of whether any capital-T truth could ever exist.

We are living through a period of Disorder. Individualism, materialism, moral relativism and subjectivism (your morals are as good as anyone else’s), neo-liberal economics, opaque bureaucracies, and now machine-based problem-solving and creativity – these problems make it difficult in our times to define what is the common good for the whole human species, or even a search for the common good.

The complexity is overwhelming, and among the responses to such Disorder are a

turning to simple answers or a cynical denial of all values. Christian Nationalism is one type of all-explaining simplicity; nihilism is the denial of all values. I will finish up by pointing out how Heschel's words and ideas can negate those responses.

But I should also point out another phenomenon. That is, despite the multiplicity of religions – so many dogmas, beliefs, and practices – mystics will tend to understand each other. Those who dedicate themselves to seeking understanding of The Divine (that is: God, or No-Self, or The Great Spirit, or the Tao) somehow do not find their experiences exclusionary. Mystics tend to acknowledge and accept each others' experiences. There might be something to that.

But returning to two forces in America today, Christian Nationalism and nihilism. How does Heschel's God help us with concepts, words, experiences and motivations to confront those movements?

Christian Nationalism

- The political Right has co-opted the evangelical movement through planning and manipulation.
- American exceptionalism is a God-given purpose.
 - The Second Coming is imminent.
 - But only after "Christian" values come to dominate American culture.
 - In 7 spheres of influence: Family, Economy/Business, Religion, Arts/Entertainment, Media, Government, Education
 - President Trump is like the Persian King Cyrus was for Babylon: God-ordained to destroy the existing culture and free the Jews to return to Jerusalem.
- The CN movement has taken advantage of those who have felt disrespected, disregarded, dishonored, disgraced and despairing.

For many, belonging to the Christian Nationalist movement has been motivating, unifying and empowering. Its success (its effectiveness and pervasiveness) have been the result of organized efforts to co-opt the evangelical movement. The CN movement surrounds its adherents with experiences, information, support and ideology. It is incredibly empowering to belong to a group that includes everyone and everything that you know, respect and love.

Some of its ideology seems very far-fetched to us, but it is motivating and even essential to its adherents. Part of that surrounding belief system is that the Second Coming is imminent, but contingent on (their form of) Christianity becoming dominant in American life. In that evolution, Donald Trump has been elevated to be serving a role analogous to King Cyrus': that is, Trump is God-ordained to destroy the modern Babylon.

It is a movement that is built on appealing to Americans affected by the 5 Diseses.

Mainstream American culture (it is Them) is experienced by many as having evolved in a direction that tries to humiliate their values and experiences. It is not difficult to imagine that feeling disrespected, disregarded, dishonored and disgraced can lead to despair and a desire for change. That change has been focused in the last 20 years (it has been a long and organized campaign) on dominating the 7 mountains of cultural influence.

The wording is that of domination, not of co-existence or correction; it is domination that the leaders seek. This is an ideology combined with an organization. That is a very formidable combination. (In fact, you have to have both to effect lasting change.)

In contrast, progressive Christians will need some practice articulating their foundational beliefs and organizing around them. Heschel's examination of the origins of Judeo-Christian understanding is a powerful start, and an effective counter-argument. God created diversity of beliefs, but unity of seeking; God cares about moral behavior; God cares more for the poor and powerless (widow and orphans in the Old Testament), than the rich and powerful. These messages are also present in the New Testament.

The evangelical Christianity that requires a personal commitment to Jesus is not the same as the CN commitment that requires a commitment to a cultural and political agenda. There is room for discussion with evangelicals, as long as there is openness (on both sides) to better understand each other's relationships to God. But conscience, openness and good will are much less possible when political partisanship is required (recall that George Washington warned in 1796 about the formation of political parties).

Christian Nationalism is an unholy alliance. Its exclusionary theology is unreligious. Its domineering intentions are un-Christian. How can possible dialogue work? But How did Catholics and Jews re-write religious history in 1965?

Nihilism in the world ...

We fail to realize that while different exponents of faith in the world of religion continue to be wary of the ecumenical movement, there is another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence: nihilism. We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?

[Read]

So let me at least introduce some thoughts on what Heschel might have meant.

“Another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence ...”

- Western Christianity provided an integrated worldview till the Reformation.
 - 150 years of religious warfare followed. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) allowed states to determine their religious affiliations.
 - At the same time, repeated epidemics of plague devastated Europe
- Enlightenment – can “reason” create human flourishing?
 - Science provided “objective” truths. The “Age of Discovery” revealed many other cultures and norms. “Reason” is elevated.
 - But French Revolution, Industrial Revolution and Darwin raised additional questions.
- 20th Century – maybe not ...
 - Wars, Holocaust, totalitarianism, post-modernism, neo-liberal secularism
- What is “truth”? How are values formed? What is meaning?

He said there was another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence. There has been a rise in secularism. As many have noted, it was almost impossible 600 years ago to imagine that God did not influence the world. In contrast, in 2026 it is almost impossible in America to agree on how God still works in the world. In a world of different cultures, it is however, also somewhat a phenomenon of America and Europe only, that nihilism is a prevalent orientation.

What about
“nihilism”?

Nihilism is the philosophical viewpoint that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. Derived from the Latin *nihil* (“nothing”), it posits that there is no inherent morality, truth, or higher authority guiding existence. It often suggests that because the universe has no built-in meaning, humans must create their own. [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy +3](#)

Key Types of Nihilism

- **Existential Nihilism:** The most common form, arguing that life has no intrinsic meaning or value.
- **Moral Nihilism:** The belief that nothing is inherently moral or immoral; objective ethical standards do not exist.
- **Epistemological Nihilism:** The position that all knowledge is possibly false and that true knowledge is unattainable.
- **Cosmic Nihilism:** The view that the universe is vast, indifferent, and completely unaware of human existence.
- **Political Nihilism:** The desire to destroy existing political, social, and religious institutions. [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy +4](#)

Once again, I bring up topics in which I am not an expert. But here is the ChatGPT answer to “what is nihilism?” I believe you can recognize that these viewpoints exist, even if the term “nihilism” is not too commonly used.

Aspects of “nihilism”

- I don't include:
 - Secular humanism
 - SBNR – “spiritual but not religious”
- I do include:
 - Disillusionment, cynicism
 - Materialism
 - Physical matter is all there is – all spiritual and intellectual experiences are still and only related to physical interactions.
 - The goal is material well-being.
- Supported by:
 - A culture of mass distraction; culture of prosperity
 - Callousness

Nihilism, at least as I am using the term today, is not simply the denial of the significance of religious experience. It thus is not the same as secular humanism, which can be very purposeful, ethical and inclusive. I also suspect that there are many secular ethical values whose origins could be traced back to religious concepts (e.g. the imago Dei in the Abrahamic religions; or the nature of suffering in Buddhism).

I also do not equate nihilism with a denial of institutional religion. Not every one of the Nones has rejected spiritual seeking. They have often rejected religion that has become “irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid” (Heschel’s words). Yet they are seeking to fill the “God-shaped hole” in their lives.

But certainly there are those, perhaps many, who have become cynical about religious practices and beliefs. Sometimes such cynicism might have resulted from disappointment with over-idealized concepts or persons. There are also many who have been traumatized by abuse in their encounters with institutional religion or neglect in their relations in general. Trauma can convert positive relations into the opposite: angry, isolated, self-centered beliefs and behaviors. Sometimes it might be caused by an absence of nurturing role models and relations. Whatever its cause, trauma can result in harsh worldviews and cynicism – there is only self-preservation left, a battle of self against all.

Nihilistic beliefs are also a by-product of scientific advances, resulting in a philosophy of Materialism. There is ever more “knowledge” that is measurable, knowledge that can be described with words and concepts. This has been called cumulative knowledge. It depends on measurements, the words and concepts that preceded it. It “explains” the physical world generally well. Extrapolated, it suggests that all emotions, and even intellectual and spiritual matters might someday be explained by the interactions of our cells and molecules. Such a scientific rationalism and Materialism is a logical

extrapolation of the trajectory of cumulative knowledge. “Artificial intelligence” is the latest evidence that programs and algorithms can identify patterns and create novel outcomes that seem “human.”

And right now the overarching goals of a philosophy of Materialism seem to be material: more wealth, more comfort, more prosperity. There is minimal attention to the greater good, and whatever attention there is is formulated in secondary terms: debates about profits, democratic processes, and culture wars are symptoms not definitions of the greater good. Even hot-button issues such as abortion, racial equity, gender equality, economic inequity, war and peace are argued as political issues, as if statistics ever revealed reality or changed minds; as if rights without responsibilities could generate a healthy society. It has long been humorous and tragic to me that there is so much conversation on how to manage society and other peoples’ minds and behaviors, when there is so little conversation and effort about how to manage one’s own mind and behaviors.

And it seems doubly unfortunate that most of the moral arguments being made are from proclamations of religious fundamentalists. It should be no surprise that the man in the street might conclude that a moral universe does not exist, and human passions are all that exists: that greed, anger and self-satisfied separation are all there can be, and that the pursuit of riches, status and proud individualism is the goal of this one life we have to live.

The mystical Heschel, joining the mystics of other traditions, would remind us that human beings are more than their intellect and reason and passions. We have emotions; we have bodies; we have experiences; we have attachments. We have purposes. The evolution of Homo sapiens has included and depended on the abilities to interact in social groups. That has been unifying, and it has been divisive.

Of course even when seeking a greater good, achievement of that goal has always been elusive. In our current times, the conditions are not conducive to examining what constitutes the greater good. We have what can be called a culture of mass distraction. Polarizing opinions and simplistic answers get attention; controversies generate attention, so controversies are invented. Social media algorithms elevate emotionally charged topics. Our attention is captured by “click bait” techniques. We have a Supreme Misleader as the President of the United States, supremely skilled and dedicated to projecting his inconsistent but always self-serving views onto this country and the world. The culture of mass distraction helps him do so.

And it is a culture of prosperity. Values that we claim to hold dear – democracy,

self-determination, equal rights, even moral relativism – are most common in First World countries. These are “WEIRD” societies: Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic. These values are not as prevalent elsewhere. Remove any of those foundational conditions, and the prosperity that results does not seem as achievable. Even now, it seems that the pursuit of prosperity has been to the detriment of the pursuit of Justice and Righteousness. And as the potential for prosperity becomes the privilege only of the top 10%, social injustice and personal confusion become more prevalent.

Finally, this combination of mass distraction and pursuit of prosperity are only possible with callousness. Callousness to other people’s suffering perhaps lies at the heart of modern culture. It is defensive, true: one cannot care about everything. But it is reflexive and unexamined now. It is even elevated as virtuous – we read that Empathy is a weakness. It allows evil to thrive. Heschel wrote that indifference to Evil [that which separates] is more insidious than Evil itself. We are used to ignoring or justifying evil, divisive deeds and situations.

But there is also another dimension – one that is immaterial, as immaterial as and as important as “love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” It is real if it is pursued. It is another type of truth besides scientific measurement.

This other dimension is the spiritual: Heschel said, “**The way to truth is an act of reason; the love of truth is an act of the spirit.**” Nihilism, not just hopelessness, results from the misdirection of a critical spiritual need: the need for purpose and meaning. With trauma and with distraction it is possible to corrupt that spiritual need into survival as the only meaning and projection of personal needs and values as the only purpose. If one doubts that such nihilism is humanly possible, one only has to examine the example of the Supreme Misleader, Donald Trump.

“Religion” in 2026

- No religion contains all understanding of God.
- All religions seek understanding of God.
- The Abrahamic traditions (including Christianity and its sects) provide culturally and historically useful models of how God works in this beautiful blue pearl of a planet. Current conditions require renewed understandings.
- Diversity and inclusiveness are the will of God.
- How should we respond to injustice and suffering?

So Rabbi Heschel comforts us and challenges us. We do have reasons to belong to each other and to be inspired by each other: we are all children of God in the Abrahamic traditions. That belonging and God's expectations – to do good and to walk justly, to love God and to love neighbor – is the basis. Other traditions seek and find God in different way, of course. But the seeking seems to be a common thread, the common thread.

But diversity and inclusiveness are seemingly the will of God: God is, God cares; God needs human partners. Human impulses have always tried to elevate human needs. Can we try to remember that basic challenge? Is an embrace of diversity and inclusiveness enough?

How should we respond to injustice and suffering? How should we respond when the world is too complex, and simple solutions are tempting? The Rabbi reminds us that seeking together will be one way of finding strength and solace, hopefully to replace the divisiveness that human societies naturally produce.

Apparently the solutions of the last several millennia need to be re-worked for the current situations. How should we respond? Next week we will see how Liberation Theology can provide different perspectives.

No religion is an island ...

TO RECOVER THE QUESTIONS

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.

Heschel's 1965 talk, “No Religion is an Island”

Dr. David Lee
Sunday Forum
Downtown United Presbyterian Church
May 3, 2026

What does “progressive” Christianity bring to conversations about social justice?

- Who was Abraham Joshua Heschel?
- “No Religion is an Island” (UTS, 1965)
 - All religions begin with awareness of Something Else, and then try to relate to That.
 - The Abrahamic religions share understanding of a God who cares how humans live.
 - Human dignity is God-given because human beings are created in God’s image.
 - Humankind has freedom and agency; God needs a partner in the world.
 - Justice and righteousness
 - Love God; love one’s neighbor
 - Many spiritualities, many perspectives on “God”
 - Inclusiveness is always God’s will.
- How can “progressive” Christian theology confront:
 - Christian Nationalism?
 - Nihilism?
- Social justice is God’s will – how do we respond?

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)

- Born into the legacy of seven generations of Hasidic rabbis in Poland.
- Went to Berlin in 1927 to study philosophy.
 - Ph.D. thesis became *The Prophets*.
- Persecuted by Nazis. Able to leave Poland 6 weeks before start of WWII.
- Eventually at Jewish Theological Seminary (1946-1972).
- Became friends with Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King.
- Spoke out against racism, Vietnam War, treatment of Russian Jews; supported Medicare, supported interreligious dialogue.
- Theology that reached not only minds, but also hearts.
 - “In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”
 - “The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference.”

“No Religion is an Island” – opening

I speak as a member of a congregation whose founder was Abraham, and the name of my rabbi is Moses.

I speak as a person who was able to leave Warsaw, the city in which I was born, just six weeks before the disaster began. My destination was New York, it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. I am a brand plucked from the fire, in which my people was burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory, and on which so much else was consumed: the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in the God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly two thousand years.

“In this eon diversity of religions is the will of God.”

Religions, I repeat, true to their own convictions, disagree profoundly and are in opposition to one another on matters of doctrine. However, if we accept the prophet's thesis that they all worship one God, even without knowing it, if we accept the principle that the majesty of God transcends the dignity of religion, should we not regard a divergent religion as His Majesty's loyal opposition? However, does not every religion maintain the claim to be true, and is not truth exclusive?

The ultimate truth is not capable of being fully and adequately expressed in concepts and words. The ultimate truth is about the situation that pertains between God and man. “The Torah speaks in the language of man.” Revelation is always an accommodation to the capacity of man. No two minds are alike, just as no two faces are alike. The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding.

Religion is a means, not the end.

Religion is a means, not the end. It becomes idolatrous when regarded as an end in itself. Over and above all being stands the Creator and Lord of history, He who transcends all. To equate religion and God is idolatry.

Does not the all-inclusiveness of God contradict the exclusiveness of any particular religion? The prospect of all men embracing one form of religion remains an eschatological hope. What about here and now? Is it not blasphemous to say: I alone have all the truth and the grace, and all those who differ live in darkness, and are abandoned by the grace of God?

More on “idolatry”

From Rabbi Heschel's 1963 speech, “Religion and Race”

“What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol. Faith in God is not simply an afterlife-insurance policy. Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy.”

Summary to this point:

- Rabbi Heschel was speaking in 1965 of the need for dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, at a time when many Christians considered Jews to be followers of an outdated religion.
- His “depth theology” defined the common ground from which religions begin: that there is a “God-shaped hole” in human lives.
 - All religions are historical-cultural answers to questions about the relationship between humankind and **God**.
- No religion contains the whole truth.
 - To imagine that a religion has all the answers is human – an act of (human) self-delusion.
- All this may be fine for seminarians. What about us, “the man on the street”?

Theology: Limitations and challenges

- Conflicting theologies
- Fundamentalism
- Ethics. Secular humanism.
- Mysticism
- Nihilism

Christian Nationalism (CN)

- The political Right has co-opted the evangelical movement through planning and manipulation.
- CN says American exceptionalism has a God-given purpose.
 - The Second Coming is imminent.
 - But only after “Christian” values come to dominate American culture.
 - In 7 spheres of influence: Family, Economy/Business, Religion, Arts/Entertainment, Media, Government, Education
 - President Trump is like the Persian King Cyrus was for Babylon: God-ordained to destroy the existing culture so the Jews could return to Jerusalem.
- The CN movement has taken advantage of those who have felt disrespected, disregarded, dishonored, disgraced and despairing.
- Christian Nationalism is not the same as being evangelical.
 - Evangelicalism and progressive Christianity can co-exist.

Nihilism in the world ...

We fail to realize that while different exponents of faith in the world of religion continue to be wary of the ecumenical movement, there is another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence: nihilism. We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?

“Another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence ...”

- Western Christianity provided an integrated worldview till the Reformation.
 - 150 years of religious warfare followed. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) allowed states to determine their religious affiliations.
 - At the same time, repeated epidemics of plague devastated Europe
- Enlightenment – can “reason” create human flourishing?
 - Science provided “objective” truths. The “Age of Discovery” revealed many other cultures and norms. “Reason” is elevated.
 - But French Revolution, Industrial Revolution and Darwin raised additional questions.
- 20th Century – maybe not ...
 - Wars, Holocaust, totalitarianism, post-modernism, neo-liberal secularism
- What is “truth”? How are values formed? What is meaning?

What about “nihilism”?

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 - The goal is material well-being.
- Supported by:
 - A culture of mass distraction; culture of prosperity
 - Callousness

“Religion” in 2026

- All religions seek understanding of God.
- No religion contains all understanding of God.
 - Exclusiveness (in understanding, in membership) approaches idolatry.
- The world (Creation) is a wonder.
 - The will of God includes diversity and inclusiveness.
- The Abrahamic traditions (including Christianity and its sects) provide culturally and historically useful models of what God expects in this beautiful blue pearl of a planet.
 - Current conditions require renewed understandings.
- But ... there is also injustice and suffering?
 - How should we respond?

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