



Discussion Questions for educational use of the 2025 Silber-Obrecht Lecture in Interreligious and Interfaith Studies, sponsored by the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies.

The 2025 lecture features Rabbi Dr. Rachel Mikva, of Chicago Theological Seminary, who addresses **“What Does it Mean to Be Human? Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Perspectives.”** Dr. Younus Mirza, Founding Director, Barzinji Institute for Global Virtual Learning, Shenandoah University, offers a response from a Muslim perspective.

Lecture 1:

- 1) Rabbi Dr. Mikva points out that human beings are the only creatures that ask questions about their identity and existence. In light of this, how do **you** view human beings? Are we good? Are we evil? Are we both? Where do you agree or disagree with the religious perspectives presented?
- 2) How do you think the quest for self-understanding (“know thyself”) shapes how humans interact with one another in groups (e.g. families, neighbors, and political societies)? Do you think this quest to answer the question ‘what does it mean to be human?’ inherently leads to a moral responsibility to act ethically toward others?
- 3) Rabbi Dr. Mikva mentions that when there have been significant leaps in scientific and technological advancements (e.g., Copernicus & Galileo, Darwin & evolution, generative AI) our sense of human uniqueness has been challenged. How do you think humans have navigated the tension between embracing these scientific advancements and preserving a sense of what makes humans “special”? Are science & humanity necessarily in conflict or are there ways to intentionally integrate these conversations? What role do diverse cultural, philosophical, and religious perspectives play in our current moment?
- 4) The idea of free will is challenged by concepts like superdeterminism or genetic and environmental influences on behavior (e.g. Crick’s ‘Astonishing Hypothesis’). To what extent do you believe that our sense of free will is compromised by these factors? How does this affect our understanding of human responsibility and ethics?

Lecture 2:

- 1) The lecture argues that religious ideas about humanity shape public policy and social norms in ways that are unacknowledged and under examined. Can you think of other examples where you

see religious ideas influencing debates on topics like gender, sexuality, or race? How do these debates reflect our broader societal views on human identity?

2) Rabbi Dr. Mikva references "mongrel epistemology," the idea that our understanding or knowledge is shaped by a complex mix of influences—such as personal experiences, social background, and cultural factors—that we can't easily separate or identify. In what ways can we embrace the concept of a "mongrel epistemology" to foster a more inclusive and fair approach to religious diversity and public policy, particularly in legal contexts—like the abortion debate?

OR

In what ways have you experienced the concept of "mongrel epistemology" in your own life? In your conversations with friends, family, and colleagues? Could the concept of a "mongrel epistemology" foster a more inclusive and fair approach to religious diversity and public policy, particularly in legal and policy contexts—like the abortion debate?

3) Regarding secularism, Rabbi Dr. Mikva says,

"I deeply appreciate Danièle Hervieu-Léger's definition of secularism. It's not the erasure of religion from the public square, but a context in which religious ideas productively engage with other ways of thinking and knowing, and no institution has a monopoly on meaning."

How can religious ideas productively engage with secular knowledge in the public square, and what role should secularism play in ensuring that no single ideology monopolizes the conversation about human dignity and societal values?

4) How can we navigate the pluralistic influence of religious ideas in public life? Does our legal system require one religious perspective to dominate, especially in a diverse society like the U.S.? How could we honor religious pluralism in law and policy?