The 2025 Silber-Obrecht Lecture
What Does it Mean to Be Human? Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Perspectives
Delivered by Rabbi Dr. Rachel S. Mikva

Lecture 1

What's so special about human beings? The Psalmist asks this question, *"What is humanity that You are mindful of them?"*—wondering why God would give power to human beings over the immense majesty of creation (Ps 8). Qur'an describes objections from the angels when God announces that humans will be *khalifa* (viceroy) on the earth; they are concerned about our propensity for corruption and violence (Sura 2).[1] (*They have a point*.)

Although the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a lot to say about what it means to be human, it's not a question we think about that often. Theological anthropology is not your usual dinner table conversation. We have opinions that show up, however, whenever an idea comes along that challenges our sense of *who we are*. Often, the culprit has been scientific discovery or technological development.

- **Copernicus and Galileo** demonstrated that humans are not the center of the universe, at least not in a way reflected in the structure of the cosmos. The earth rotates around the sun, and we live in one of countless solar systems in the galaxy.
- **Darwin** theorized and further study has affirmed that we are the product of evolution, sharing a common ancestor with other primates.
- **Genetics** has established that we share at least 96% of our DNA with a chimpanzee—and up to 60% with a banana.
- **Studies of animals** prove that certain species do almost everything we thought was unique to humans: crows make tools, dolphins give their children names, songbirds create distinct cultures, macaques teach each other based on experience.
- **With combined** insights from psychology, neuroscience, and other fields—we've learned that the operation of the human—mind and body—looks increasingly like a biological machine. Love and awe and even consciousness itself are chemical reactions.[2]
- **And, as a thinking machine**, we are not all the extraordinary. AI can outperform humans in computational tasks; they have beaten human experts in chess and Go. Generative AI

uses large language models to synthesize huge amounts of information and use it to write or illustrate better (and certainly faster) than a significant percentage of humans.

- **There's also** a developing theory in quantum mechanics that maintains the entire future of the universe was determined at the moment of the Big Bang. Wind it back to the beginning and press "play," and *everything* will unfold the same way.[3]

These findings have not been easily digested. Galileo's book on heliocentrism (1632) was banned and he spent the rest of his life under house arrest. He avoided execution only by claiming that he was simply presenting an argument, but was not personally persuaded by the evidence. While we have come to terms with that one, a Gallup poll from last May reported that 37% of Americans still believe that God created human beings in their present form; we did not evolve. Another choice was evolution *with God's guiding hand*, selected by an additional 34% of respondents.[4] Even those among us who embrace scientific learning, including evolution, don't much like the idea that our free will is compromised by a potent mix of genetic, cultural, and chemical inputs—or particle physics.

Most of us also still feel, in our gut, that there *is* something special about human beings. –Even as we simultaneously recognize the perils of this self-aggrandizing instinct, particularly in our Anthropocene Age.

One thing about us is that we ask the question. As Jürgen Moltmann noted: *A cow is always simply a cow. It does not ask, "What is a cow? Who am I?" Only [humans] ask such questions, and indeed clearly [have] to ask them."*[5] I would add that "What am I?" and "Who am I?" are not abstract philosophical questions; they inevitably lead us to ask, "How *ought* I to be in the world? And how ought I treat other human beings?"

My argument is simple. When pressed by technology, science, philosophy, politics, or the simple fact of difference to think about what it means to be human, religious notions that are embedded in our cultural imaginations will surface—and they shape our common life.

I am not trying to demonstrate that religious ideas matter or have something to contribute to thinking about what it means to be human; I think it's obvious that they do. And I don't mean simply that religious ideas of the human shape how we may think about each other or treat each other in the grocery store. I mean that they shape *public policy and social norms*, even with our putative separation of religion and state.[6] The questions they raise figure prominently in our culture wars. Given that these ideas are so fundamental to how we see ourselves, it is easy to mistake our perspective as a universal one—and try to enact it into law. A commitment to pluralism, however, requires that we recognize the diversity of theological anthropologies. And the first step is to excavate the religious ideas that are embedded in our cultural imaginations.

So I would like to share some of what Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have to say about what it means to be human, and investigate how these teachings show up in the world. (Other spiritual lifestances have equally compelling teachings, of course, but time is limited and these are the

three I know something about:-) The long history of relationship between these traditions yields a rich landscape for us to traverse.

Methodology

I'll start with Scriptural sources and their interpretations for several reasons. First, they are seen by "Peoples of the Book" as the basis for much of religious life, providing an extensive and explicit record of how particular beliefs and practices were to be understood and embodied. Proper actions have always depended on how we interpret the texts, which is why we argue so vociferously about what they mean.

In addition, learning *about* lifestances different than our own is fundamental in learning *with* people who claim lifestances different than our own. We come to understand important things about each other—even though we can only scratch the surface, and we know people interpret their traditions in diverse ways.

A review of scriptural exegesis also reveals broader possibilities of meaning that have been obscured through the sifting of history and processes of normalization. No teaching has always meant what we now think it means. And still, the history of interpretation shapes our present.[7]

Besides, my doctoral training is in exegesis; I'm that person with a hammer who always sees a nail. Admittedly, lived religion has never been identical to the written record, which tends to privilege the perspective of intellectual elites (primarily literate men who studied and taught these texts). Nevertheless, the sources represent crucial aspects of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Those of us who claim these texts as sacred Scripture, we turn them over and over, and find everything about us buried within—big questions about our existence. We'll talk about three of them:

- *Are we good?* (This is the one we'll discuss today.)
- *Are we free?*
- *Are we more than dust, more than the flesh and blood that decomposes in the earth?*

Bear in mind, however, that I am not a comparative theologian; I teach Interreligious Studies. I'm interested in diverse ideas about humanity in order to investigate how those differences impact our common life. This is the critical distinction of Interreligious Studies. We study encounters—historical and contemporary, intentional and unintentional, embodied and imagined, congenial and conflictual—of individuals and communities who orient around religion differently.[8]

So after we explore whether or not we are "good," we will investigate the possible impact of these ideas on our criminal justice system. Then we'll take up the other two questions in the second lecture, and explore how *those* religious ideas shape the public square. At the end, I will offer a few thoughts about what I think the role of religion *ought* to be in our public discourse and body politic. Of course, for every "answer" we find, we discover a whole new set of questions, but that is the thrill of learning.

Scriptures of Creation

The stories told of our creation in the Scriptures, and the meanings that have been excavated from them, are the fundament of what the traditions have to say about human beings. So this is where we must begin.

There are two stories of creation in Hebrew Bible, as we know. I prefer the narrative of Genesis 1, attributed to the priestly authors: male and female are created simultaneously, in the image of God. Like birds and fish, they are charged to be fruitful and multiply, and all creatures are vegetarian. We recognize that its account of God telling humans to "fill the earth and master it," giving them dominion over all other living creatures (Gen 1:28), is problematic. It is a charge that we have taken too much to heart, acting as if all of creation exists only for our benefit.

Still, the idea of "image of God" becomes very important within Judaism and Christianity—as a signifier of what distinguishes our creation as human beings. But Genesis doesn't explain what it means. So of course we have countless interpretations offered over the centuries. They generally boil down to three categories: substantive, functional, or relational. [Let me flesh that out just a bit.]

- Substantive: There could be something special about what we *are*: our form, our intellect, or a soul.
- Or functional: It might be our purpose in creation that is unique, a vocation: assigned responsibility for the created world, to emulate the Divine in what we do, or to serve as co-creators in "translating the …script of the divine playwright into a living performance."[9]
- Or relational: It could be our capacity to recognize and relate to the Divine, the transcendent. –What Christian theologian Karl Rahner described as an intrinsic disposition of the human mind toward the infinite.

While there is little agreement about what "image of God" *means*, there is more consensus about one of its primary consequences: human dignity. We understand that all human life is valuable and worthy of respect *and self-respect.* Rabbi Akiba (a sage from the 1st-2nd century) used to say, "Humanity is beloved in that we were created in the image of God. It is a mark of superabundant love that it was *made known to us* that we were created in the image of God (*m. Avot 3:14*).[10]

Today, living amidst the AI revolution, this self-perception takes on a new urgency. What is it that distinguishes us from artificial intelligence? If they acquire sentience, self-consciousness, agency—what then? How should *they* be treated? Will they also develop an intrinsic disposition toward the infinite? And how are we now emulating the Divine instinct to create in our own image?[11]

The second story in Genesis—the one commonly identified as a story of Adam and Eve (Gen 2-3)—has also inspired endless amounts of commentary over time. And it is this tale that has most captured the religious imagination of common folk. We see it in **art… literature… even politics**. Apparently, portraying individual persons and their foibles makes for better drama. By the way,

this is the depiction of Adam and Eve as created by ChatGPT—nice European looking figures dressed in lovely togas and gowns….

With any consciousness of genre, we should recognize this story as mythology. There are magic trees and talking snakes. God makes noises walking around in the garden and there are sword-wielding cherubim that guard the entrance. Yet 56% of Americans believe that Adam and Eve were real people.[12] We have learned that the more a story is repeated, the more people think it is true—and this one has certainly been told a few times.

Still, mythology also comes to teach truths. Whether understood as story or history, we can appreciate many of its astute observations about humanity.

- The idea of a common ancestor teaches we are *one* species—an essential truth that has been denied more than once in our history.
- The idea that the human (*adam* – not a guy named Adam) was created out of the earth (*adamah*) reveals a prescient intuition that *of course* we are made of the same stuff as the rest of creation.
- Our given task, to till and tend the earth, affirms that we are created for a purpose—one that transcends our own existence.
- As evidenced by the characters eating from the tree even after being warned, we recognize our insatiable drive to know and discover, even when it can harm us.
- Made clear from the fact that Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake, we don't like taking responsibility for our actions.
- And we have a profound need of relationship. This is revealed at some length; *It is not good for the human to be alone* (Gen 2:18) *HaAdam*—the human—names all the animals but finds no partner—until the creation of another human. An *ezer k'negdo*—literally "a helper over against him," but often translated "helpmeet." Who knows what that really is. But we do know that humans are super-cooperators. We are super competitive also, but what we have accomplished has been because of our capacity to work together.[13]

Quranic accounts of our creation share some details and not others. I'll mention two notable differences in the story of the first man and woman eating from the forbidden tree—differences *in the portrayal of humanity*:

- The text emphasizes that they acted together, repeatedly using the dual grammatical form (7:19-23), and
- They repent of their disobedience and plead for God's forgiveness (7:23, sim 2:37).[14]

The former precludes some of the virulent critique of Eve that one finds in biblical exegesis; women are *not* more susceptible to sin. The latter establishes the centrality of error and repair to the human experience—and mercy as central to our understanding of the Divine. These concepts are significant within Judaism and Christianity as well, but in Qur'an they are foundational to our creation.

Qur'an also has passages that discuss the creation of humanity in general, again presenting important differences alongside profound resonance with biblical teachings.

- Qur'an does *not* describe humanity as created in the Divine image; it scrupulously avoids suggesting any comparability with God. However, the idea does appear in a *hadith* (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2612*), and Qur'an details how God breathed the Divine *Ruh* (spirit – 32:7-9, 38:71-2) into our clay form.[15] This feels similar to Gen 2:7, where God blows the breath of life into the *adam*.
- Sura 32 notes that God has created all things in the best possible way, an idea that resonates with the biblical repetition, "God saw that it was good."
- Manifold aspects of creation are made subservient to humanity (14:32-33), and we are identified as *khalifa* (2:30).[16] As in the biblical dialectic, this power entails stewardship and ethical responsibility.
- Qur'an also speaks of humanity accepting "the Trust" (*al-amana*), an obligation of faith and ethics that the heavens, earth, and mountains apparently had the good sense to decline. Humans accepted out of ignorance, not recognizing the enormity of our vocation (33:72).[17]

Are We Good?

Let's turn to the question that got me into this mess: *Are we good?* The history of exegesis has harvested diverse answers from the seeds of these stories, carefully gleaned over the centuries by hosts of meaning-makers. I was completely fascinated by the different perspectives found within and among these three traditions. **To state them** too starkly and simply, at least at the outset:

- Judaism asserts that we are each created with a *yetzer tov*, a good inclination, and *yetzer hara*, the bad inclination. We choose between them in every moment.
- In Western Christianity, the notion of original sin has predominated since the time of Augustine. Adam and Eve's disobedience, their infamous snack from the tree of knowledge of good and bad, transmitted to humanity for all time a sinful nature. We are not sinners because we commit sins; rather we sin because we are born sinners.
- And Islam teaches a vastly different notion of our original nature. We are born with *fiṭra*, an innate disposition to recognize goodness and the oneness of God.

You could write a whole book on these teachings—a separate book for each religious tradition—but I will offer just a few ways in which voices over time have drawn out these ideas.

Just for fun, here's how Chat GPT illustrates *yetzer tov and yetzer hara*… original sin… and *fiṭra*.

Judaism

The rabbinic sages of Late Antiquity read Torah very closely. Embraced as a perfect text revealed from on high, every word, every letter (and even its decorative adornment) was understood to bear significance. Rabbi Nachman, son of Rabbi Hisda, for example, noticed that the Hebrew word ***vayyitzer***—and God *formed* the human from the dust of the earth—in Genesis 2:7 has an

extra letter. Two *yods* instead of one. So he connected the rabbinic notion that we have competing inclinations to the text of our creation: God formed us (*vayyitzer*) with two *yetzers*, *yetzer tov and yetzer hara* (*b. Berachot 61a*).[18] (Of course, there are a handful of alternative explanations for the double-yod that follow his, all preserved for what we might glean from them.)

His interpretation is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, a massive compilation of teachings collected over the first five to six centuries of the Common Era. Found elsewhere in the Talmud is a remarkable story in which the rabbis imagine "capturing" the *yetzer hara.* He warns them that if they kill him, the world will come to an end. Prudently, they lock him up for three days and discover, to their dismay, that no hen laid an egg during that period; they had to let him go (*b. Yoma 69b*).[19]

A midrash from around the same time goes further: When God announced about creation that "it was good," it alluded also to our good inclination. And when God announced, "It was *very* good" (Gen 1:31), it alluded to the evil inclination. How could that be? Because the *yetzer hara* is the seat of our instincts for survival, for procreation, for building and striving and expanding our reach (*Gen Rab 9:7*). *We need it.* So it's not like the classic cartoon where you have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, each trying to influence your decisions. It's more like your superego and your id. Ultimately, it is up to us to direct all our inclinations (even those of the hangry toddler who lives forever within you) toward service of the Most High.

Jewish teachings do not identify the story of Adam and Eve as a fall; they simply made a bad decision.[20] In the whole story, the word "sin" isn't even mentioned. Besides, rabbinic thought associates sin with "missing the mark," not a fundamental brokenness, not an ontological evil. It is simply an acknowledgement that some of our drives can lead us astray. The story of humanity in the Garden illustrates how these choices can alienate us from one another, from God, from the natural world. But there is no "original sin" and, in Jewish understanding, humanity does not need to be "saved." Torah and rest of Hebrew Bible are full of calls to repent, to return, to reconcile, to make better choices.

Although it doesn't relate to our two competing inclinations, I want to share another explication of the garden narrative that suggests something about what it means to be human. Maimonides, a 12th-century rabbi, philosopher, and physician, wondered why God wouldn't want human beings to enjoy the fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and bad. Wouldn't it be of benefit, providing the necessary understanding to make moral choices? He suggested that, originally, we had a superior knowledge before eating from this tree—knowledge of truth and falsity.

You don't argue that "the earth is a sphere" is good and "the earth is flat" is bad, he explained; rather the former is true and the latter is false. Imagine we had that for *everything*. For many of the most important ideas, however, all we have after violating the divine command is relative judgment uncertainly grounded in personal feelings about right and wrong, contingent upon culture and context (*Guide for the Perplexed* I:2). I don't know whether Maimonides thought about this as storytelling or an actual historical loss, but the insight is profound. In the era of "fake

news" and truthiness, with people consuming information from different sources based on their politics–the gap between what we know and what we believe (and our inability to tell the difference) is larger than ever.

Christianity

Early Christian conceptions of the human emerge through countless debates with religious others and within their own community. For example, the Gnostics believed that only spiritual dimensions of existence were good, and the material world was created by a lesser divinity who was prone to cruelty and jealousy. If God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there so much suffering and even evil in the world? This question of theodicy haunts all three traditions, and Christian ideas of the "Fall" offer one explanation: human disobedience disrupted the original harmony of creation, a cosmos that was indeed created "very good."

In spreading the young faith, Christian leaders also sought to explain how all of humanity needs God's grace as manifest through Jesus as Christ. Building on the apparently extraneous language of Genesis 1 that we were created in the "image" *and* "likeness" of God, the 2nd-century bishop Irenaeus argued that "likeness" is carried in the human spirit, and that's what was lost after the Fall. Now born only body and soul, we retain just the Divine image—but the spirit can be restored for those who believe in Jesus, who thereby receive divine influence and know divine truth.[21]

It was Augustine who most effectively propagated the conceptual structure of original sin.
Where rabbinic interpretations viewed the discussion of "image" and "likeness" in the list of Adam's descendants, as found in Genesis 5, to transmit our original nature, Augustine understood it to be of a different order. In *The City of God* (published in 426), he wrote: "Man reproduced what man became, not when he was being created, but when he was sinning and being punished" (13.3).

It wasn't unanimous. Pelagius and those who followed him were among the early Christian voices who contested the notion of original sin. They argued for the inviolable character of human freedom even after the Fall. Augustine countered that we do have free will, but it is as if the scales are weighted against us by sin; only by the grace of God can we be good. If people could avoid sin through their own efforts, what need is there for Christ?

Pelagianism was ruled heretical and original sin was affirmed as orthodox dogma. At the Council of Orange in 529 (Canon 2), for example, it was written:

> If anyone asserts that Adam's sin affected him alone and not his descendants also, or at least if they declare that it is only the death of the body which is the punishment for sin, and not also that sin, which is the death of the soul, passed through one man to the whole human race, they do injustice to God and contradict the Apostle, who says [in Romans 5:12] "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."[22]

The passage from Romans continues, identifying Jesus as the "one man" whose righteousness leads to justification and life for all (5:18).[23]

Yet for many modern Christians, a rigid understanding of original sin is problematic. If we are born sinners, how can God hold us morally accountable? It is also fatalistic, they argue, promoting political quietism and the status quo. Why work against injustice? And it is itself unjust—a species held eternally responsible for the actions of a long-ago ancestor. Danielle Shroyer urges that we speak instead of "original blessing," held steadfastly in relationship with God, no matter what.[24]

Yet we see the capacity of humans to do wrong, writ large across the course of human history—embodied in every single person we know, including ourselves. In 1908, G.K. Chesterton quipped, "Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved."[25]

Kierkegaard, Tillich, Niebuhr (and others) have tried to reclaim the doctrine without asserting a primordial act of disobedience by the first humans. It is simply human nature. This approach satisfies concerns about mistaking mythology for history, and preserves God's moral integrity so that no one is punished for the sin of our ancestors. Yet it forfeits the conviction that the need for salvation precedes any commission of sin. Ian McFarland argues that it is better to reclaim the doctrine by recognizing that the Fall disordered our desires—no matter how we exercise our will—and only God's salvation can reorient them properly.[26] So we can *do* good, but need salvation to *be* good.

Islam

—Very different than the original goodness of *fiṭra.* Islamic thought roots its conception of *fiṭra* in Sura 30: "So set your face firmly toward the religion, as a pure natural believer (*ḥanīf*), Allah's natural constitution (*fiṭra*) according to which He constituted (*faṭara*) humanity. There is no changing Allah's creation." (30:30).[27]

And there is an authenticated *hadith* [an oral tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad] that mentions *fiṭra* as well:

> "The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: 'There is not a child born, except upon the *fiṭra*. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Zoroastrian. This is just as one animal is brought forth from another unbranded; have you ever seen an animal born branded until you brand it yourselves?'"

Then Abū Hurayra, who transmitted the teaching, cited the verse about *fiṭra.*[28]

The *hadith* has shaped interpretations of the verse in two significant ways. First, it directed the emphasis toward our *religious* nature—a theological *fiṭra*, if you will. Secondly, it suggested that all the named parental influences—Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian—are leading the child away from the *fiṭra*. According to Camilla Adang, "the majority of Muslim thinkers… came to equate *fiṭra* with Islam, and hence to believe that everyone starts [their] life as a Muslim."[29]

The 13th-century jurist and Quranic commentator al-Qurtubi helps to complicate this a bit. He pointed out that "*Islam* (submission) and *iman* (faith) are declared with the tongue, embraced with the heart, and performed with the limbs."[30] So the *fiṭra* mentioned in the verse cannot be Islam in its particular sense. We are not *born* doing those things.

In the next generation, Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) clarified that *fiṭra* is the religion of Islam in *potentiality*. He compared it to a newborn's instinct for its mother's milk; it *will* suckle if nothing interferes. "Similarly, the human *fiṭra* is an innate faculty and body of knowledge that, unimpeded by countervailing forces, will actualize knowledge, love, and worship of God."[31] We are born *muslim*, with a lower-case m, ready to surrender to the Divine.

The 11th-century linguist al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108) defined *fiṭra Allāh* as the inclination for faith which God has implanted in all individuals. Qur'an attests to this conviction in Sura 7, describing a universal primordial covenant: God collects all the souls ever to be born and asks, "*Am I not your Lord?*" "*Yes, we bear witness*" (7:172). We don't remember this experience, but it is understood to have left an indelible imprint on our souls.

There is a story about Abraham in Qur'an (6:74-83) that illustrates this instinct, a narrative that is also found in rabbinic midrash. It portrays Abraham, the archetypal *ḥanif*, seeking his Lord. As evening falls, he sees a star in the heavens and imagines that is his Lord, but then it sets and he identifies the moon as his Lord instead. Yet dawn vanquishes it. As the sun rises, he imagines *that* is his Lord, but then it sets in the western sky. Finally, he turns to the One who created everything.

The passage made some commentators squirm, being forced to consider that a prophet might commit idolatry, however briefly. Yet the text asserts that Allah guided him along this path in order to invest him with certainty (6:75). Reason and experience guide our faith.

Some interpreters believe that *fiṭra* also extends to our epistemological and ethical capacities. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) claimed that *fiṭra* includes a body of knowledge that leads to other knowledge, a framework of understanding and intellectual curiosity that leads us tirelessly toward truth (*Revival of the Religious Sciences* 21).

Many Islamic scholars grappled with the same quandary that perplexed Maimonides, namely the distinction between relative moral judgments, even if widely held, and knowledge of truth. Ibn Sina and al-Ghazālī ultimately excluded moral judgments from the *fiṭra*. We *don't* know right and wrong on our own, they argued; that's why we need Divine revelation.[32]

Ibn Taymiyya, however, understood *fiṭra* in expansive terms, including the moral sphere. With a predisposition to recognize valid/invalid arguments, to sense the reality of things, *fiṭra* can also undergird ethics: "Souls are naturally disposed (*majbūla*) to love justice and its supporters, and to hate injustice and its supporters; this love, which is in the fiṭra, is what is meant for [justice] to be good."[33] It does not mean that we are all sweetness and light, incapable of wrongdoing or

justifying evil—just as Christianity's notion of original sin doesn't mean we can never do anything good.

Our various drives draw us away from our *fiṭra*, however. Just as the angels warned (and God did not disagree), humans can be destructive, greedy, and violent. But it is interesting to consider instincts for goodness that are also part of human nature. Studies have shown that five-month-olds demonstrate a preference for good behavior, one-year olds will try to soothe someone in distress, and the fundaments of conscience start to build in early childhood. We seek love. We gravitate toward beauty. Are these behaviors part of our factory setting? Are we hard-wired to learn goodness the way we are wired to learn language?[34]

I have laid out the differences at a very basic level. Of course, the more you examine the multitude of voices over the centuries, the more variance you find within and the more similarities you find between the traditions.[35]

How Do These Concepts Show Up in Our Common Life?

We must turn, however, to the implications for Interreligious Engagement: How do these concepts show up in our common life?

There is actually a very interesting thesis that emphasis on original sin, particularly within Protestantism, has shaped a spirit of punishment in the United States. Since we are situated in the North American context, the outsized influence of Christianity shouldn't surprise us. (T.) Richard Snyder maintains that popular Christian misunderstandings of human nature and Divine grace contribute to our plague of mass incarceration and retributive justice. Those of us who act on our sinful nature are reaping the just deserts of their unredeemed state. Grace and salvation are viewed in individual, non-historical terms, exempting us from complicity in systems of oppression and injustice that contribute to crime. And by dividing the world into the saved and the damned, we reinforce the divide between "us" and "them" that makes it so easy to lock human beings away. Creation grace—the goodness that is embedded in creation and in the human being, created in the image of God—is ignored.

Trying to craft an argument parallel to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Snyder doesn't claim that the theology of original sin *produces* our spirit of punishment. Rather, it contributes in substantive ways and provides moral justification, influencing even those who don't believe in or think about Christian conceptions of sin. It is "in the air." Snyder distinguishes between three primary modes in which "the church" has historically influenced the larger society: through force, overt ideology, and inspiriting. Even after the disestablishment of religion, Christian hegemony remains in (what we routinely call) the West. "To speak of hegemony," Snyder asserts, "is to recognize the holistic nature of the mechanisms of domination, including the unintentional, the indirect, and the covert. Of these less direct mechanisms of control, religious practices have emerged as extremely important."[36]

I agree with his analysis of the ways religion shapes our common life, but the specific conclusions about the criminal justice system are not totally persuasive. Unfortunately, it oversimplifies Christian perspectives of sin. It doesn't explain why a "more religious" era before the 1960s drove a century of liberalizing criminal justice reform. And it doesn't compare the justice system in America to that of nations shaped by different religious conceptions of human nature—a comparison that would not necessarily support the thesis.[37]

There's another study, a comparison of European and American law by Joshua Kleinfeld, that might. "For most of its history, criminal punishment in the United States was milder than punishment in continental Europe–and therefore, it was thought, more humane." It was connected to a political conviction, a standard tenet of Enlightenment belief: democracy requires penal moderation. Rights-bearing citizens won't tolerate abusive treatment.[38]

Yet a crime wave in mid-twentieth century America brought even more deep-seated cultural values to the fore. It radically reversed the relative harshness in U.S. versus European criminal justice and produced differing conceptions of crime. Kleinfeld writes:

> American punishment pictures serious offenders as morally deformed people rather than ordinary people who have committed crimes. Their criminality is thus both immutable and devaluing, a feature of the actor rather than merely the act.[39]

This sounds quite a bit like the theological conviction that we aren't sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we *are* sinners. People commit crimes because they are criminals.

Is this an instance of my hypothesis—that when pressed by external developments (in this case, the U.S. crime wave), religious notions about what it means to be human that are embedded in our cultural imaginations will surface—and shape our common life?

It is perhaps buttressed by a very different observation that Kleinfeld also makes. The German Lutheran church had a prominent role in reforming Germany's criminal justice system so that it emphasized rehabilitation. Although in many ways this is at odds with the tradition of German Lutheranism, he speculates that after World War II Germany most of all needed to believe in the mutability of evil.[40]

We should note the distinction between the "inspiriting" influence of the previous examples and the overt institutional influence in this one. There is another distinction, however, that further complicates our thinking about how religious ideas of the human influence the body politic. Christian convictions undergird two very different directions for criminal justice. It is not that one is misreading the tradition and the other is not, but rather there is a range of factors that shape how we interpret our multivocal, dynamic traditions.

So before we move on to our other questions and how the religious ideas show up in the world, let's conclude this first lecture with brief consideration of what Terence Keel calls "mongrel epistemology." We can't identify all the sources of how we come to know or think something (each source itself being an amalgam of influences); we certainly can't tease them apart.[41]

Religious, political and economic convictions. Gender, race, age, nationality, and social class. Life experience and the historical moment. These all shape our "everyday theology."

Many scholars, for example, assert that Americans' religious commitments increasingly shape their political ones. We have seen plenty of evidence for this in recent election cycles. Yet there are also studies that demonstrate the causal relationship is often reversed: partisan identities determine how people engage with religion—what they believe, how they read Scripture, what kind of community they might join.[42]

What can we say then about how "religious ideas of the human" affect our common life? When we get to discussion of body and soul, I think the connections are more evident. I will argue that religious conceptions of the human have a profound impact on public policy regarding abortion and public attitudes regarding embodiment (particularly sexuality). Still, I cannot "prove" religion is the prime cause.

When we get to free will, we'll see there is a rich religious exploration of its possibilities and limitations. And we'll recognize the profound discomfort that many people feel when evolutionary biology and quantum physics suggest there is no such thing as free will. But it is unlikely that religious teachings form the core of our resistance.

The very idea that "religion" is a separable part of our worldview that can objectively be examined is suspect. But religion is in the mix. It always has been. Until our national experiment in separating religion and state, it was never imagined that you could remove particularistic religious values from affairs of state. Some political forces are trying to officially reinstate them. I'm hoping that most of you share my profound objection to that goal. I'm hoping you share my commitment to pluralism and honoring the diversity of our theological anthropologies. As I stated at the outset, the first step is to excavate the religious ideas that are embedded in our cultural imaginations—ideas that justify law and social norms, impacting our common life. So we will keep digging.

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[1] In a 4-5th century rabbinic text, Genesis Rabba, angels offer a similar objection (8:5).

[2] Sandee LaMotte, "Are you in love or just high on chemicals in your brain? Answer: Yes," CNN Health (February 14, 2020) https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/14/health/brain-on-love-wellness/index.html; Summer Allen, "The Science of Awe" (Berkeley: Greater Good Science Center, 2018) https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Awe_FINAL.pdf; Peter D. Kitchener and Colin G. Hales, "What Neuroscientists Think, and Don't Think, About Consciousness," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (February 24, 2022), doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2022.767612.

[3] John Horgan, "Does Quantum Mechanics Rule Out Free Will?" *Scientific American*, March 10, 2022; https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-quantum-mechanics-rule-out-free-will.

[4] https://news.gallup.com/poll/21814/evolution-creationism-intelligent-design.aspx

[5] Moltmann, *On Human Being: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present*, trans. John Sturdy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 1. The quote is edited to be gender inclusive.

[6] Winnifred Fallers Sullivan persuasively argued that such separation is illusory. Numerous issues related to religious difference require legislation, administration, or adjudication. Governments regulate ritual slaughter of meat and what kinds of cases can be taken to religious courts. Prisons determine which lifestances they will accommodate for inmates in terms of dietary restrictions and daily practice. The Selective Service System judged

whether one's conscientious objector claim was legitimate. Municipalities decide which holidays to grant as paid days off, etc. See *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[7] Georgia Warnke wrote, "The way in which we have understood the past and the way in which our ancestors have projected the future determines our own range of possibilities." *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 39.

[8] Rachel S. Mikva, *Interreligious Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 5-6.

[9] Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith, and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, Jewish Lights, 2005), 102.

[10] For discussion of meanings of the image of God, see: Yair Lorberbaum, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology and Law in Classical Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and "Human Dignity in the Jewish Tradition," in Marcus Düwell et al. eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 135-44; Alan Mittleman, *Human Nature and Jewish Thought: Judaism's Case for Why Persons Matter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 44-64; David Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 39-53.

[11] See Noreen L Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002); Marius Dorobantu, "Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike: Artificial Intelligence and a Multi-Level Relational Interpretation of the Imago Dei," *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2021): 81–107, https://doi.org/10.1628/ptsc-2021-0006; Sara Lumbreras, "Lessons from the Quest for Artificial Consciousness: The Emergence Criterion, Insight-Oriented AI, and Imago Dei," *Zygon*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12827.

[12] https://slate.com/technology/2014/12/creationism-poll-how-many-americans-believe-the-bible-is-literal-inerrant-or-symbolic.html

[13] Rashi's Torah commentary on Gen 2:18 states: If he is worthy, a helper. If he is not worthy, [then] over against him (also *Gen Rab* 17:4).

[14] See John Kaltner and Younus Y. Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 16-19. Also, God teaches Adam the names rather than Adam inventing them (2:31), highlighting God's omniscience.

[15] Sura 24:45 indicates that God created all animals from water. While it is often interpreted as a reference to reproductive fluids, it also aligns with the scientific hypothesis that land animals evolved from water-based life.

[16] The passages generally include an account of Iblis, an angel who refuses to prostrate to Adam (see Suras 2, 7, 15, 20, 38). The narrative resembles the 6-7th c. Christian Syriac text, *Cave of Treasures*, which has the same objection set in the mouth of Satan: I am made of fire and he is made of earth. https://www2.iath.virginia.edu/anderson/retellings/Cave.html#div1.2.7

[17] See Mona Siddiqui, "Being Human in Islam," in Michael Ipgrave and David Marshall, eds. *Humanity: Texts and Contexts: Christian and Muslim Perspectives.* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 15-21.

[18] Similarly, an extra *bet* in Deut 6:5, *b'chol l'vavcha* (with all your heart), is read as an instruction to demonstrate our love for God with both our evil and our good inclinations (*Sifrei Deut 32, m. Ber 9:5,* Rashi on Deut 6:5).

[19] Compelling analyses can be found in Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmud Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 61–76; Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Refuting the *Yetzer:* The Evil Inclination and the Limits of Rabbinic Discourse," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 117–41, doi:10.1163/105369909X12506863090396.

[20] Some interpretations suggest it is a necessary step in human development. Islamic interpretation is similar. For example, Muhammad Iqbal commented, ''The Fall does not mean any moral depravity; it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature." *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, Pakistan: Ashraf Press, 1960), 85.

[21] See John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[22] Similarly at the Council of Carthage in 418 (Canon 110). Likely contributing to Augustine's interpretation was the fact that he was reading a Latin translation of Romans 5:12 that rendered ἐφ' ᾧ (because) as *in quo* (in him) [all sinned].

[23] Cf John 1:29: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

[24] Shroyer, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), xi.

[25] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2008), 14.
[26] Ian A. McFarland, "Original Sin," in Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber, eds., *The T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin* (2016), 303-318.
[27] Translation blends Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, *The Noble Qur'an* (Norwich: Bookwork, 2005) and Jon Hoover, "Fiṭra," *Encyclopaedia of Islam III*.
[28] Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1292, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2658. Translation about branding vs. mutilation is found in M. Nazir Kahn, "Fiṭra: The Primordial Nature of Man" (January 1, 2015) https://spiritualperception.org/fiṭrah-the-primordial-nature-of-man/.
[29] Adang, "Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind: The Concept of Fiṭra in the Works of Ibn Ḥazm," *Al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Arabes* 21, no. 2 (2000): 393.
[30] *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*; see also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 991.
[31] Hoover, "Fiṭra."
[32] Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's Use of 'Original Human Disposition' (*fiṭra*) and its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna," *The Muslim World* (2011): 30, doi: 10.1111/j.1478-1913.2011.01376.x. See also Syamsuddin Arif, "Rethinking the Concept of *Fiṭra*: Natural Disposition, Reason, and Conscience," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 40, nos. 3-4: 77–103, doi: 10.35632/ajis.v40i3-4.3189.
[33] As cited in Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 224. Earlier, Al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (1339-1414) defined *fiṭra* not only as a natural disposition to accept religion, but also inborn knowledge and morality (*Taʿrīfāt--Definitions*). See also, Ramon Harvey, "Primordial Human Nature (*fiṭra*)," *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe (2024), https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/PrimordialHumanNature; Hoover, "Fiṭra."
[34] See Kahn, "Fiṭra: The Primordial Nature of Man." "The moral values upon which we construct our lives stem from the intuitions which naturally arise in childhood and which are not stamped out by overriding sociocultural pressures." See also Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Crown, 2013).
[35] For example, *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 16 states that the *yetzer hara* is inborn, whereas the *yetzer tov* activates at the age of majority. The notion of *tikkun olam* as developed by Rabbi Luria in the 16th century talks about a broken world; while not the fault of humans, it sometimes sounds like a fallen world. A Catholic catechism states, "Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin and turns a man back towards God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle"—sounding a bit like the yetzers. So does the struggle Islamic scholars discuss between our desire to feed the appetite of the nafs, which the human being knows to be destructive by virtue of the fiṭra (Kahn). In turn, Rahner's notion of being drawn toward the transcendent sounds like *fiṭra.*
[36] Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2001), 23.
[37] Wael B. Hallaq argues that before its encounter with European colonialism, Islamic law fostered a more rehabilitative penal system, without incarceration. *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[38] Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Beccaria, and Tocqueville all advanced this argument. See Kleinfeld, "Two Cultures of Punishment," *Stanford Law Review* 68 (May 2016): 935.
[39] Ibid., 933.
[40] Ibid., 1033, 1035. "The Christian belief views every individual—offender, victim, and those related to them—as a person created and loved by God whose life entails both: suffering and guilt and the chance of cure and ever new beginning. This view of mankind and of the social world is far from idealistic euphoria, but it must also resist the expulsion of individuals from the community." (Council of Protestant Churches, 1990)
[41] Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 16. His own work focuses on the blend of religious and scientific thought in the study of race, a preoccupation that he argues should be viewed as the continuation of Christian intellectual history and its conceptions of difference.
[42] See, e.g. Michele Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); J. Matthew Wilson, ed., *Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007).