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Intellectual Idolatry:
Name of God taken in vain
when linked arrogantly to any empty ideology

In the Ten Commandments we are told that we should not bear the name of the Lord our God in vain. (*Exodus* 20:6) However, as simple as this commandment may appear to be, it bristles with difficulties.

Most Christians have been wont to regard it as a prohibition against the use of profane language and especially the use of God's name in connection with that profanity. Yet this interpretation is hardly a satisfying one. It is difficult to believe that such an innocuous sin as the use of foul language would be important enough to justify a place in the Decalogue. Moreover, the sin described in the third commandment of the Decalogue is one for which God says He will never forgive us. (*Ibid.*) Can it be that while other sins are forgiven the sin of "cussing" is without the possibility of atonement? For these reasons and others, Jews have understood the commandment quite differently.

One of the rather popular interpretations of the commandment is that it prohibits false testimony and the use of an oath in God's name to give credence to perjury. However, as heinous as is the offense of perjury it would appear that this is precisely what the ninth commandment deals with. That commandment ordered us never to bear false witness. Why, then, is there need for a separate commandment with regard to bearing the name of the Lord in vain? Why the repetition?

Some rabbis did suggest that the commandment against the use of the Lord's name in vain was meant to interdict any oath which was false and not exclusively oaths in courts of law. (*Ibid* *Ezra Exodus* 20:6) When it is day I must not swear that it is night. However, if I swear falsely with regard to some inconsequential

fact, why should God have expressed himself so harshly that this false oath will be unpardonable and he who utters it will be denied forgiveness? How much damage will I have done to merit God's unremitting wrath!

There is still a fourth interpretation which strains the language a bit but at least it is charged with great significance. That interpretation suggests that no human being and no people should include in their name the name of God when in fact they do so in vain because they have no commitment to Him or His will. Thus the commandment is directed against hypocrisy.

The Jewish people, for example, are called Israel. The word Israel includes the name of God. And if Israel is not a God-fearing people they should not call themselves by His name. The same would apply to a Jewish state. It ought not to bear a name which includes the name of God if it is not committed to His existence or to the fulfillment of His will.

At least this interpretation helps one to understand why it is that the offense is so serious. It is the offense of sham and duplicity. It is the offense of living under false pretenses. Such an offense is serious enough to warrant God's sense of outrage. The Prophets of Israel always spoke out against hypocrisy and thus their invectives would be in the best tradition of the third commandment.

Yet there is a fifth interpretation which I call to your attention because of its timeliness. It is suggested by one of the greatest philosophers of Judaism in the twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig. It is also incorporated in that translation of the Bible in which he and Martin Buber collaborated.

What they say is that the words are to be translated as follows: Do not apply the name of God to an ideal or a cause which is truly bankrupt and does not warrant being deemed an ultimate.

Thus the logical order of the commandments becomes most impressive. First, God introduces Himself as He who took the Jewish people out of the land of bondage. Then He prohibits the worship of idols, gods made of gold or silver or stone. Lastly, He prohibits His being identified with anything that does not justify dignification by the use of His name.

This prohibition then would mean that first, we must not use God's name in connection with causes or movements that are

“Nichts” but would like to be regarded as divinely inspired or divinely charged, and second that we have no right to regard as an ultimate that which is not an ultimate. Altogether too often ideologies have been expounded by all kinds of propagandists who are presumptuous enough to claim that they are in possession of the final, ultimate truth.

In our own day, communism, liberalism, and individualism have been such ideologies. Unfortunately, our generation has beheld the bankruptcy of all. Yet the proponents of those “isms” all regard themselves as having the ultimate, absolute truth. They deem their ideologies final ultimate ones. Sometimes they have been killed, tortured, and depressed, as crusaders fighting God’s battles. Even when they denied the existence of God, they deified their own ideology and crowned themselves Prophets.

It is against this that the third commandment is directed. Perhaps this is what was meant by one great American editor who said that what united all Jews was the belief, not in God, but in the fact that other than God there is no God. This made the Jewish people resistant to all kinds of idolatry and all forms of hero worship.

As Jews, we could not fit into the scheme of things set by dictators of the left or the right. We were always too aware of our own infallibility and we dared to speak in the name of God only with the greatest awe and trepidation, and even then with grave doubts as to whether we had the whole truth.

It is never out of order to remind Jews and non-Jews alike that humility, uncertainty, and doubt are good for the human soul especially when they help us to doubt our own omniscience.

Rabbis too can use the reminder. We must never apply God’s name to “Nichts.”