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When Harvard stopped requiring freshmen to learn Biblical Hebrew, several members of the faculty left Massachusetts for Connecticut to found a new school. For a long time the intense focus on the literal meaning of God’s words did not leave New Haven, the city that built a green from which Christ would lead the elect to heaven. Yale was meant to prepare young men for their leadership roles in the church, as well as in the republic, the law, and business. Her leaders understood that a thorough and correct relationship with the divine was a prerequisite to profound leadership.

Their students quickly disappointed the Harvard men who founded Yale as a haven for Congregationalist orthodoxy: theological arguments drove intellectual discussion. Yale quickly became a place where differing religious and moral ideas, discussed in fraternity and pursued in profundity, held sway. We believe, as we must believe, that we can listen to multiple arguments and conclude that one is right. We believe, as we must believe, that a university can entertain contradictory ideas and pursue them as if one and only one were true.

Today, we seek to continue the tradition of heterodox Yalies able to debate religion, agreeing at first only that the debate is worth having. Far be it from us to demand a return to Jonathan Edwards’ college. Our magazine is limited in denomination only by the knowledge of its contributors. Though Yale’s founders dedicated our university to Lux et Veritas, subsequent generations of Yalies have ignored the divine light. The Yale seal quotes the Bible to remind us that without the possibility of revelation, all the logic in this world isn’t enough. Our college of prophets depends on her sons’ and daughters’ familiarity with traditional moral arguments for its success. Put simply, we don’t believe that Yale’s project works without a study of theology. The public conversation among educated people has strayed a little too far from foundational and
essential questions of the Creator and the created. It’s time for a frankly intellectual journal that can examine the groundwork of a religious society. What any of that means we expect to examine.

In this first issue of Fiat Lux, we publish a personal essay of Andrew Chan, M.D., in which he argues, on the authority of the Bible, of the need for missions. We review Acts of Faith by Dr. Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, a Muslim who relies on a variety of religious traditions and sociological realities to argue for a religiously plural 21st century. Kevin Brook Alexander discusses whether the great Jewish thinker Maimonides was more Aristotilean than we thought he was. Our articles differ on the authorities they accept and on the subjects they consider religious. In the future, we look forward to articles on the deepest questions from our atheist and agnostic friends, and even to the airing of intra-denominational laundry in public; if we are all brothers and sisters, then we can stand to hear and maybe stand to learn a thing or two from our siblings’ communal and religious struggles.

These questions plague us, but we are blessed to have them. Our pursuit of truth makes us humans. Hence the university; hence Yale. Our journal will not be limited to those who assume a revealed truth. Fiat Lux, will, however, provide a sort of home from which students of Jerusalem can write their theology. Even those of us who argue not from human reason but from revelation disagree. Let them disagree here. Old, old, old Blue traditions and the very nature of religious man demand that there be light, but so do the events of the last few decades. Educated men had thought that religion was dead, or comatose, that traditional monotheism, like the cult of Dionysus, could no longer act on geopolitics. Leaders and peoples all over the world have turned back toward the faith. This worldwide return, especially to fundamentalist religion, has been well advertised but, at least on campus, only superficially analyzed and little investigated. Perhaps there was no turn at all, but the so-called chattering classes have just begun to notice. We welcome religious fundamentalists and their critics. Present your case, but prepare your textual citations and your religious
assumptions; this congregation examines the sermon. Any progress in the status of individuals and cultures under the governance of supposedly religious systems will come by enlightened argument in a religious framework. And so we, made in God’s image, say Fiat Lux. Let there be light.

We can no longer ignore the whispers about God echoing in Yale’s hallowed halls. Students lead religious lives. Until now, they have had medium either to examine those religious lives or to debate their effects on Yale. Some have resolved, and others will debate, that Yale is a Protestant college or a Judeo-Christian college. Some highlight our ethnic diversity, while others emphasize the university’s common traditions. The questions imply more questions about how centralized the university ought to be, whether Yale ought to teach one thing, and whether that thing ought to be moral. Does Yale teach to prepare for ecclesiastical, national, global service, or does the academic mission have neither practical nor spiritual import? Professor Anthony Kronman recently argued in Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life that Yale and other institutions of higher education no longer teach answers to the great questions and ought to, with recourse to great thinkers but not to religions. The winner of our inaugural essay contest, Meredith Williams, argues in this issue that religion can, in fact, play an essential role in teaching of this spiritual seriousness. This issue also features an interview with new Yale University Chaplain Sharon Kugler and her ideas about religion at Yale. And Jacob Albert reflects on what Professor Jim Sleeper’s lecture at the Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale about religion and the civil sphere says about pluralism in New Haven and in America.

Our name plays on God’s dictum, related in St. Jerome’s Vulgate. “DIXITQUE DEUS, FIAT LUX, ET FACTA EST LUX.” And God said, let there be light, and there was light. It plays on Yale’s motto, Lux et Veritas. This is not the beginning of theological discussion at Yale. From Reverend Abraham Pierson to Reverend William Sloane Coffin, Yale men and women have dealt with their responsibility
for God, for Country, and for Yale by, like Abraham, questioning what it is exactly that God wants. We have always read and talked about the stories of creation again and again, and we hope that, this time, you’ll begin again with us as we try to create something not quite new that hasn’t quite been done before. Fiat Lux,

Michael Leo Pomeranz, SM ’09
Founder, Editor-in-Chief
Every year, Yale attracts thousands of students from as many regional and religious backgrounds. By plane, train, car and cab, the new freshmen flock to a campus of aged, gothic architecture where they study thermodynamics, 17th century French theater and Nietzsche to the occasional sounding of church bells. Yet for many, Yale’s spiritual heritage lies only in these aesthetics, and the college experience is as far removed from pious contemplation as is a frat party from religious services.

Professor Anthony Kronman aptly seizes upon this problem in his article “Why are we here?” (Boston Globe, September 16, 2007.) The humanities and the university as a whole now shy away from asking life’s deepest questions, and students all too often experience Yale as a mere reprieve between high school and career. Indeed, the difference between high school and college resume-building is difficult to decipher. Cramming in as much coursework and extracurricular activity as possible, Bulldogs leave Yale’s cathedral-like halls leading lives as unexamined as when they entered. However, Professor Kronman implies that the answer is not to return to religious roots, but to establish secular humanism as the school’s “nondogmatic” dogma. He writes, “Our culture may be spiritually impoverished, but what it needs is not more religion. What it needs is an alternative to religion, for colleges and universities to become again the places they once were - spiritually serious but nondogmatic, concerned with the soul but agnostic about God.”

This message is deeply troubling to the religious scholar, who does not see the critical questioning of both religious and non-religious
knowledge as antithetical to faith. Indeed, far from a place “agnostic about God,” Yale was chartered in 1701 as a school “wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences [and] through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State.” Certainly the university has, since its Protestant past, undergone tremendous growth and developed a diverse body of beliefs. Does this religious pluralism make a policy of pure secularism necessary for the campus to keep the peace? If so, and if deference to Yale’s traditions is not enough to keep religion a part of campus life, let us remove the remnants of fundamentalism immediately, changing our watchcry to: “For Man, For Country, and for Yale!”

Yale has not done so; on the contrary, Yale has done much to accommodate private practice and religious undergraduate organizations. Yet in this brave new, globalizing world, faith is on the defensive and often considered inappropriate in the public sphere. Perhaps it is because we fear disagreement or disunity more than we cherish honest dialogue; perhaps we are simply too busy to examine who we are or why we are here. Either way, truth is often diluted into relativistic value systems, and conversations about religion occur only with the filter of political correctness.

While I share Professor Kronman’s hope that Yale will return to scholarly life complete with spiritual seriousness, I assert that religion can have this role at Yale. The continued presence of religion at Yale makes it a place where students and faculty prompt one another to examine of their beliefs. We need not shy away from such inter-religious discourse, or indeed from debate between religious and irreligious perspectives. Such conversations can and should challenge our most deeply-held views, allowing us both to respectfully disagree and to find common grounds for celebration. The consideration of a higher power, of good that surpasses human flaws and of moral practices beyond preferences has a role at Yale. Let us hold unswervingly to this hope, that a world-class university can not only continue to provide a home for multiple religions, but can also allow Bulldogs of all faiths to find themselves while blessing one another through meaningful exchanges.
Fiat Lux sat down with Yale Chaplain Sharon Kugler this year to discuss her new chaplaincy at Yale, her ministry, background, and religious life.

Fiat Lux: Can you tell me about your upbringing in the church?

Chaplain Sharon Kugler: Sure. I was born into a very devout Roman Catholic family. In terms of personal spirituality I grew up in a family where we went to Mass every day, all four seasons of the year, and that was - although I wouldn’t have known that to be the case growing up - I believed it to be a spiritual discipline when I was young. I stopped going to Mass every day somewhere around the age of 16 or 17 when I rebelled in terms of that, but I now look back and know those were formative years in terms of spiritual discipline. As a growing Catholic woman, I would say I probably awakened right about 16 or 17 to some of the contradictions I felt between my identity as a Catholic and what I understood the Church, meaning Rome, teaching, to be, and had to kind of understand where I fit.

I didn’t quite like the fact that I couldn’t be an altar girl. In those days girls couldn’t serve in much of a capacity at all. I mean, if you wanted to think about becoming a nun that would become one option; if you wanted to continue in the church in a sort of vocational way but talk about laity and service and what that meant, I didn’t grow up with any knowledge of that. At the same time, that understanding was really exploding in terms of realizing, ‘Oh, it isn’t always what people think it is.’ When you think of the Catholic Church, you think of the Pope and you think of the Vatican and certainly that’s a big part of it. One of the things people will say is, ‘Oh, you know, all Catholics think this way.’ And I think my awakening was, ‘Oh, all Catholics don’t think the same,’ and that’s ok, and I don’t necessarily everyone to think like me, but I do need to know there’s room in this Church for gray areas on different issues.
FL: Can you pinpoint when that moment was?

SK: I think that moment for me came right around my junior year in college - well, there probably are two. We were social activists. There was a lot of talk about what it means to be a person of faith and also about sticking your neck out for what you believe, and there were a few things on the table at the time. One of them certainly was women’s rights, and that was of particular importance to me, both in terms of women of poverty and of violence against women. And I began to discern how there are ripples of violence that can be found in society, as I saw that we were also part of a church that is pretty deliberate about what the roles of women are and what they aren’t. My campus minister at the time was a woman, a lay woman, a very well-educated person. We worked on a Mother’s Day liturgy, a Mother’s Day Catholic Mass that we were really nervous about. We worked with Jesuits. It was my first time sort of feeling like I was in the inner sanctum and it was scary because we were talking about having a woman preach, and that would be kind of revolutionary at the time. But I know how powerful it felt to take a risk like that, to take something that is so precious and has been precious to me from the time I can remember – meaning a liturgy – and add an element that wasn’t traditionally accepted, and to do it in a gentle, mindful way. At the same time, that same year, another person who was on the campus ministry staff was actually an Episcopal woman ordained into the Episcopal priesthood; it was the first time in my life I saw ever a woman on the altar. That was a transforming moment. To see someone like me up there, preaching, smiling lovingly and beautifully. I’ll never forget it.

So those were kind of pivotal moments. Then I guess I fast-forward to when I was recently graduated from college and called back to Santa Clara to be a campus minister. I certainly didn’t think of myself as someone who would actually do that. I was headed to law school. I was going to go the patient or client advocacy route and work for justice that way and never envisioned myself actually doing religious work.
FL: You say you were sort of brought in as the woman minister. How would you say that being a woman still influences our Chaplaincy?

SK: Well, you know, it’s so funny. So many years have passed since that time and the things I used to focus on and think people are seeing the minute they see me - they see a woman, and so they have a set of preconceived notions that they attach to that - I’ve stopped thinking about myself that way. I mean it’s all a part of who I am. It’s just like all the years working at Johns Hopkins in such a multifaith environment. Yeah, I’m Roman Catholic, but I’m not the Roman Catholic chaplain. So I approach it as a person of faith, clear in who I am and what that individual spirituality is for me, but also very clear that there is much I do not know, and that I am daily informed by all the world’s religions. So, the woman part? I haven’t thought of it for a long time to the degree that I am thinking about it lately because it seems to be history-making here. I wasn’t the first woman chaplain at Hopkins – I succeeded a woman there – so it’s kind of interesting to come somewhere where it does have a certain particular light that is turned back on. I guess I like being older in the midst of all this because I am not terribly thrown by comments of, ‘How a woman could do this?’

I almost laugh at it. I remember when I visited campus last March, early April, some students came up and were talking to me after I was in a general meeting with some students, a number of Battell deacons. Someone asked, ‘Are you concerned? Because there’s a lot of women on the staff, and the way this looks, people will feel excluded.’ And inside I just laughed because my whole professional life has been about who isn’t included, who’s missing from the picture, trying to empower people who haven’t felt they’ve had a voice. So suddenly to be in the position where I have the voice, I would hope that there’d be some trust that I’m always looking for all those voices. And if at any given point it happens to be a male voice that’s missing, I’ll be looking for it, but I also kind of laugh, you know. I think that by and large women who are committed to this kind of work are always looking to being inclusive, to say, “Let’s make sure everybody is heard, is thought of.”
FL: In between being the chaplain at Santa Clara and now, you were the founding Director of the AIDS Interfaith Residential Services. Can you tell me about the founding of that program?

SK: That was actually my first exposure to work outside of the Catholic Church. It was a program that was funded by judicatory leaders in the Baltimore area, meaning bishops, executors, et cetera. I’m not sure what it’s called here but it’s called the Associated Jewish Charities, it might be called Federation, the Society of Friends - whatever the umbrella organizations are for different religious groups - had all kicked in seed money for some sort of housing and/or hospice program for people with AIDS. It came about because a Church group that found it had ended up as interfaith - it started out Catholic, and Presbyterian, I think - had members with AIDS who were dying. They were educated folks who, when they looked into, ‘Ok, where will I be able to be my last days?’ looked into hospice and they found out that no place would take them, because this was in the early to mid-80s and, at least in Baltimore, I think that the learning curve was a bit stretched. I had come from California where I would say we were about five years ahead – because the volume of the transmission there was larger than in Baltimore – in terms of understanding the disease and doing community health education. And so when I came to Baltimore and started in that job and would do some community work just trying to fundraise for it, I realized, ‘Oh, wow, people still think if they shake my hand they might get AIDS - this is how disconnected we are from real true knowledge.’

But the seeds of that program really came from a couple of guys that were trying to figure out how they were going to spend their last days and realized that the doors were closing on them. And they were educated enough and plugged in the community, to start organizing. So they got the churches involved and then the churches got the other traditions. So rabbis got involved. So, it started out with a very humble idea, which is how do we legally open a facility – and by legally, I mean, so we don’t have huge licensing issues – how do we legally open a facility that takes care of people in last-stage or transitional-stage AIDS, so they’re not
sick enough to be in an ICU in a hospital but not well enough to live on their own? And the hospices weren’t ready to take them just yet. Just like funeral homes. There was only one funeral home in Baltimore that would take someone who died of AIDS, because they were scared of what to do with the bodily fluids.

It’s one thing to say we need hospices to change their regulation; that’s months, if not years, in the offing. In the meantime, people are dying and dying alone. At the same time, it was interesting in Baltimore because the IV drug-using population were ending up being the larger needy population for this service. It wasn’t a particularly easy population to take care of. They didn’t have an advocacy body. And really the gay and lesbian community ended up being a real advocacy body for a community they may not have ordinarily aligned themselves with. So it was a really interesting time to do the work. What we ending up doing was opening the facility; we rented it from Mercy Sisters, a religious order that had a big house, and decided to open quietly and be the very best neighbors we could be in this neighborhood. We didn’t make any pronouncements about who we were going in and we just did the work. And that’s what ended up happening. The program really has grown. Ironically, the guy that was the spearhead never got to use it himself. He died ten days after it opened. He got too sick to ever be there. But he saw it open. He saw it open. And he saw the archbishop walk through the door, which is what he wanted. He wanted to see as high up as he could in the religious world come in and acknowledge what this meant. And I’d say my experience working in that program and with people with AIDS was some of the most humbling work I’ve ever done.

FL: You also worked at a battered women’s shelter in Ohio.

SK: Yes. To be frank, I knew nothing. I thought I knew a lot. I got out of college. I was feminist, I believed all women needed to know was that they had every bit the same right to things as men, and that’s what these women need to know, I realized, they couldn’t care squat about this snot-nose right out of college who has read lots of feminist political theory. What they really needed
to know was how they were going to feed their kids, feel safe, and feel loved, and sometimes all that got tangled up and mixed up, and they compromised feeling loved for feeling safe and what they thought was feeling loved. That experience for me, I learned a lot more than I ever think I taught. I learned that it isn’t enough to say you deserve better than not to be beaten in your loving relationship. You also have to enable people to be able to see themselves free. When you’re burdened with three small children and trying to feed them - and this was the 80s so there were a lot of steel mills closing - my college education and my privilege flew in the face of these women’s reality. So they taught me a lot more than I ever feel like I did, you know – I may have helped because I was on the other end of the phone when someone was screaming in the emergency room, but in terms of feeling like I effected change, I don’t know that I did. They did that for me.

FL: Yale has always had Protestant Chaplains until now.

SK: I’ve heard.

FL: This has given an interesting moment to think about the future of mainline Protestantism both at Yale and across the country. Do you have thoughts on what that future might be?

SK: I couldn’t pretend to know the future, but I can tell you what the present is. The present – and this is not unique to Yale, this is what we see nationally – I believe we are in a post-denominational time, and by we I mean the Christian community. Now it could be said that this might be true for Jews and even for particular sects within the Muslim community, you can tease it out. But I’ll explain it in a Christian context. The mainline Protestant churches, and I’ll narrow it to in surrounding areas college campuses, are not experiencing the booming they once had in terms of attendance and participation of young adults. And then there are those post-denominational mindsets, meaning churches that say, ‘I don’t need to be Methodist,’ or ‘I don’t need to be Lutheran’ – they’re not community-based interdenominational, but Christian interdenominational. And they may have been born out of some
sort of necessity. Even within the evangelical community, that isn’t easily defined. I may say ‘evangelical Christian’ and you may say, ‘fundamentalist.’ That may be what comes to your mind; but that isn’t who everyone is within the evangelical community. And even within the fundamentalist community they have a different self-understanding.

**FL:** Do you see right now great moral imperatives that need to be addressed, across all churches and traditions, or great moral questions that we are going to be answering the next year or generation? If so, what are they?

**SK:** It’s ‘Are we caring for the weakest in society? And are we doing it in such a way that it can end for them?’ Because I think we can end poverty. Or are we doing in such a way as to make us feel better, and then throwing up our hands because it becomes too complicated, because they are too needy? And why are they so needy?

Well, have they been educated? That’s why you guys, meaning college students, Yale students, you are the hope. I have this little post-it note on my computer [from when] somebody asked me, ‘How do you describe what you do for a living?’ I said, ‘I cultivate tomorrow’s hope.’ And that’s what you are. You’re the best and the brightest and you can figure this out.

I guess the other big question is the environment, the question of taking care of creation. Human creation and nature - people are paying more attention to that now than I can ever remember. Suddenly, and at a much quicker pace than many social changes, people are actually talking about the simplest of things, like that we must recycle, because the earth is not always going to be with us the way we want it to be. We can have a hand in changing that.

These aren’t in any particular order, but I guess that other piece of it is how the world’s religious and spiritual traditions can coexist. It’s one thing in an academic environment where just by definition
you’re here to learn, and so you’re going to encounter people who are different, and that’s going to excite you and you’re going to find your comfort zone and you’re going to find where you’re uncomfortable and all of that. But, you know, we live in a world where we are killing each other because of claimed differences of creed. To me, that could be our undoing. That could very well be our undoing, and it goes back to you guys and what you learn and how you are with people who are different from yourselves and how you take it out into the world.

**FL:** Do you think that the various houses (faith houses, cultural houses) on campus are unnecessarily segregating, or is there some value to students’ associating with members of their own cultural communities?

**SK:** Everyone needs family. Everyone needs the familiar. You need to be able to say a word and have it not be a teachable moment. For whatever reason, the routine of a morning prayer, even if it means nothing to you, the routine means something because it’s familiar and you need it in your life. So I don’t have an issue with that. I think that has meaning and relevance and importance.

My feeling is that what would be wonderful and what I assume happens is that there are invitations to people to experience these things, and above all, when we need each other, to care. Our labels don’t matter; what matters is our humanity. I see that Yale students are every bit as capable as stepping outside of themselves and caring for someone else when they’re suffering.

We all need to hold on to what’s familiar to know who we are. People ask me all the time, ‘Why don’t you stop being Catholic? You could be ordained in any other Christian tradition that you care to be part of.’ But I am Catholic! She laughs. That’s my flesh. So that’s fine. There are things about being in the Catholic Church that I love and cherish and always will. But there are moments when a Muslim brother or sister of mine is in need, where they’re my brother and sister. I want to be invited into their house just as I want to invite them into mine.
FL: Is the privileged time of Christianity on campus over?

SK: I don’t think that it’s over. I think we are experiencing an expansion of what it means to be part of a greater religious community. But I think that everybody has to learn that we are not holding the center of meaning in this great community we’re a part of. We are richly diverse. We are not all alike. We’re not all men. We’re not all white. We’re not all Christian. But we are we.
On November 6th, Professor Jim Sleeper, who teaches in the political science department at Yale, gave an interesting lecture titled, “Hebrews, Jews, and the American Republic.” The topic was pluralism in the United States, and it is Sleeper’s glum belief that our nation is slowly approaching the end of its pluralistic age.

Any discussion of pluralism would be impossible without a first understanding what it is that holds societies together. In his lecture, Sleeper examined how a certain element of individual identity must be repressed in order to integrate the larger social sphere. “To become part of societies,” Sleeper explains, “outsiders must exhibit a primordial attachment to the state and repress other types of primordial attachment.” The term “primordial attachment” means exactly what it sounds like: it is an instinctual sense of belonging and loyalty that is primordial because it has helped human communities cohere since prehistoric times.

Sleeper lectured at the Slifka Center, which is the center for Jewish life here at Yale. Yale has houses and buildings for almost every one of its cultural or religious groups, yet it seems to me that Slifka is by far the biggest, best, and wealthiest of these buildings. Befittingly, Sleeper spent quite some time examining Jewish influence on contemporary American political life, as well as the Hebrew roots of the American Republic. While born from Anglo-Saxon and Protestant ideals, the American Republic was undeniably shaped by an early Hebrew influence. There was, as Sleeper puts it, “a twisted Jewish taproot in America’s primordial roots.”

Examples abound. The first towns in New England, for instance, were given biblically Hebrew names, such as New Canaan and Salem. America’s first inhabitants, the Native Americans, were labeled as “Amalekites,” in order to portray their slaughter in a more biblical light. The first valedictorian speeches here at Yale
were given in Hebrew, and even Yale’s seal contains Hebrew writing. Undoubtedly, there was a tremendous admiration during the beginnings of the American Republic for the stern legal code and deeply patriarchal ethical values of the ancient Hebrews. This emulation of Hebraic traditions did not, however, readily translate into an open embrace of Jews in America.

In all of its puritan reverence for the conduct and obedience of the Hebrew patriarchs, the early American Republic certainly admired the moral and legal foundations of the Jewish people. However, Sleeper notes, the actual Jews of the day were not treated with nearly as much reverence. For a long time in American history, it seemed that the Jews were eternally doomed to carry the burden of historic stereotypes. The Jews—the actual Jews—would forever be finicky arguers and swarthy shylocks, never the austere Hebraic law-givers the Americans so respected.

Yet Sleeper stresses that the Jews have been remarkably good at integrating into seemingly coherent, plastic-sealed, foreign communities. A self-labeled “nation in exile” for the larger part of their collective history, the Jews knew that survival depended on how successfully they integrated into cultures not their own. Sleeper quotes the Talmud, the source of Jewish law: “Only trees have roots. Men have legs.” Minus genocides and persecutions, this brief statement adequately sums up 3000 years of Jewish history.

Having mastered the art of cross-culture integration, the Jews ultimately became very much embedded within the American Republic—in part because assimilation was a large component of what it meant to be a Jew in a hostile land, but also in part because America eventually became the home-place of immigrants throughout the globe. America did indeed become a “promised land”: a pluralistic haven, not just for Jews, but for people from all four corners of the earth, from all faiths and flags.

Looking at America today, I tell myself that things look slightly different. It is not so clear anymore whether Jews in America are
living in a truly welcoming, pluralistic society. But many things have been chipping at the American pluralistic cement: September 11th and its relationship to political tensions in the Middle East and at home, the evangelicalization of both national and international politics, and the quagmires generated by America’s involvement in Israeli politics.

Thinking of the future of pluralism in this country, I remember a question Sleeper put forth to his audience. He asked, “What happens when a civil sphere loses its coherence?” For Sleeper, a nation without coherence necessarily crumbles into civil strife and religious discord. It strikes me that our own pluralistic nation has itself begun to approach these ends. Our religious pluralism—our cream-colored pillar of national strength—is slowly descending beneath the waves. It is difficult to be a Jew today because one gets tied up with the question of Israel. It is harder and harder to identify equally as a Jew and as an American. It seems to be either one or the other: Jews either assimilate to the point where they have lost their Jewishness, or else they have become outsiders, thinking, once more, about their survival.

I feel that it is a troubled time in America not just for the Jews, but for religious people of any sort. Religious life everywhere is being threatened. Here at Yale, we live and interact in an environment that is far more welcoming of religious self-expression than are many other collegiate settings, whose students regard the actual practice of religion as mindless adherence to meaningless traditions.

An article in the Yale Herald titled “From Ashes to Clashes” (Yale Herald, November 2, 2007) examined the extent to which Yale’s inchoate multi-faith identity was born from Yale’s decaying Christian identity. There is certainly today a coexistence of various faiths at Yale. What appears to be lacking is a cogent unity of any sort—the unity without which there can be no pluralism, but only noisy cohabitation. While Yale is clearly very open towards religious self-expression, it lacks a religious cohesiveness, and the religious community—slightly bewildered amid an infrastructure
that cannot, despite its many efforts, fully define itself religiously—
wanders, asking confused questions to which no one seems to know the answer.

The current dominant Protestant streak at Yale finds its roots in the university’s origins. Today, ceremonies of many religious faiths are conducted at Dwight Hall Chapel, originally a Protestant prayer space. However, it seems at times that Yale’s official Protestantism is merely a façade of sorts—a façade kept in place because no one really knows what a multicolored, multi-faith mural would really look here, below the tall gothic walls.

Religious life in America is at a crossroads. It has become fashionable among educated people to deny religion altogether. There is no such thing as religion, many claim—only dogmatism. Biologists and academic superstars such as Richard Dawkins and Steven Jay Gould have written extremely popular (and controversial) books in which they extol scientific reasoning for its accuracy and rationality, while portraying religious behavior of any sort as something akin to belief in magic. And since September 11th, religion has become increasingly associated with extremist thinking. Thus the combat is not merely between science and religion, but between religion and dogma.

With religious life stuck between a rock and a hard place, there is no question that religious pluralism, too, is under duress. Perhaps the crumbling of pluralism in America is a symptom of something larger. Or perhaps it is the actual disease responsible for the malaise affecting our nation’s politics both at home and abroad. But these questions are unimportant. What is important is to recognize that without an acceptance of religion, there can be no religious pluralism. And without the religious pluralism which was at the root of its very creation, the American Republic can no longer hold on to its civic virtues.

When asked what was to be expected from the evaporation of pluralism in America, Sleeper replied that “There is always a temptation to retreat to the suckle of warring kin.” Involved in
several wars on fronts both ideological and physical, America certainly seems to be suckling from something vicious.

A pluralistic society is one that recognizes that cogency can be achieved only through equal treatment and interaction of its various parts. Without any cogency, there can be no parts, and without parts, all that is left is a Stepfordian nightmare of noxious normalcy.
Following 48 hours of travel, our team arrived in the town of Jinja, situated in south-eastern Uganda on the northern edge of Lake Victoria. We were welcomed by David Livingstone, who heads the Father’s Divine Love Ministry, and the forty-five children of the orphanage. Although there was no electricity when we arrived at sunset, the excited and welcoming faces of the children were radiant in the fading light, and our tired bodies ceased complaining.

We lived in the orphanage for the following week, traveling each day by minivan to different villages to perform medical clinics. One clinic was held within the orphanage, to assess both the children living there and also the local community. Others were held in consultation with local church and community leaders, to build up the local church through our presence. Each day presented new challenges with regards to conditions, specific local clusters of conditions, and dealing with overwhelming numbers of patients at each location.

Although each medical member of the team had served in short-term missions in the past, the ailments that we diagnosed and treated shocked us all, both in the severity of the illnesses and the lack of medical resources available. Critically ill children were being turned away from local hospitals because of inability to afford treatment, and those with illnesses living in the villages were bearing pain and discomfort which we could not imagine being tolerable. And easily treatable medical conditions, which we now rarely see in the western world, continue to trouble these populations in great numbers.
We returned exhausted to the orphanage each evening, and we were welcomed each time with the joyful faces of the children. I have no doubt that the joy in these children infected each of us, and the time that we spent in Jinja. We were prepared to show our love for these children as part of our mission, but these children were able to show us so much more of our Father’s love. They sang and danced each night as we spent time together in fellowship. They served each other with joyful hearts, sweeping the floors, preparing the food, washing the clothing – all done as if it were a privilege rather than a chore. And although our team was divided into small groups to attend separate services on the Sunday, we each reported back having attended the most joyful celebrations of worship we had ever seen.

“You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.” Psalm 30: 11-12.

Their joy in times of hardship will be engraved in my heart. One particular evening, after our team had performed medical service at another orphanage, we arrived to find that one of the resident workers at the orphanage was required to attend the police station, and he was detained. The children were clearly upset that one of their two “fathers” was absent. But they drew enough strength to still smile. To still perform their daily chores. To still serve each other. And one boy found enough strength to stand before our team and thank us for our prayers. My heart was broken and I wept. Not because of their sorrow in this time of need, but because children deserve a childhood, deserve happiness, deserve a loving home.

The second half of our journey took us to the town of Goma, located on the eastern border of Democratic Republic of the Congo, near its border with Rwanda. This town received two million refugees fleeing from the genocide which occurred in Rwanda in 1994, has been in civil war since 1997, and was 40% destroyed by the eruption of nearby Mount Nyiragongo in 2002.
Near the bank of Lake Kivu stands the DOCS hospital, led by Dr Jo and Lyn Lusi our gracious hosts.

We each had an individual program set out before us, which combined the needs of the hospital and wider community with the skills that each of us brought. Medical and dental outreach clinics were run in the local prison, the orphanages, a pygmy village and in other surrounding villages.

The hospital runs a service mainly directed towards victims of war, trauma victims, and children. During the Rwandan genocide, many women were systematically raped and abused, leaving physical and emotional trauma. The DOCS hospital specialises in repair of vesicovaginal fistulae – tears in the wall between the bladder and vagina leaving the women continuously incontinent. Members of our team spent time in theatre learning and performing this surgery. In addition, ongoing counselling for these women is provided by DOCS, and trained counsellors from our team assisted and taught the local staff.

The hospital also receives trauma victims, many from gunshot wounds and road trauma. We helped to design a new emergency department, now currently under construction, a well as teaching trauma management and critical care. There was much delight in decorating the bare walls of the paediatric wards, as well as fellowship with the patients in the many wards. Each of our medical staff had the opportunity to teach the House Medical Officers and other hospital staff in late afternoon lectures.

Different members of our team set off each morning to different medical outreach services. These served the local prison, street-kid ministries, and underprivileged communities such as the local pygmies. The conditions in which each of these populations lived were certainly humbling to us – even many of the prisoners had not had a meal within the past week. The gratitude that these hardened men showed us was a reminder that many men, many Christian men have served time in prison. These brothers in Christ will remain in our prayers long after we have left.
The function of short-term mission trips, in my mind, has certainly been consolidated by this eighteen-day journey. In Matthew 25:35-36, Jesus does not ask for us to create a farm, nor build a well. He does not ask that we teach cloth making, create vaccines, nor break open prison gates. The simple, loving tasks he requests from us represents the best of what we can do in our circumstance when we come across our brothers in need – and that is what He asks from us.

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Matthew 25:35-36
Dr. Eboo Patel’s *Acts of Faith* is not a normal autobiography. It is part manifesto, part bibliography, part how-to guide. The complexity of the genre seems fitting for a complex life. Patel started a youth organization to change the world, published two books, and was named a Rhodes Scholar, all in the first three decades of life. Patel’s life story starts normally enough: he went to school, played basketball, prayed when his family made him, ate lunch with kids of different faiths but never talked about it, and went to college. The normalcy of that life is exactly the point of his book.

Patel observes that people in the 21st century are religious and with different religions. He quotes W. E. B. Du Bois saying that “[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” The problem of the 21st century, Patel argues, is that of the faith line. On one side of the faith line stand those who think people of different religions should kill each other; on the other side, those who think they should live together. Patel thinks that young people will answer that question. It is not sufficient, Patel argues, for pluralists not to teach their children that their religion promotes totalitarianism. Patel concludes that pluralists must teach their children pluralism and ground it in religion. *Acts of Faith* explains how Patel reached this conclusion and what he has done since he reached it.

At Patel’s University of Illinois, campus identity politics focused on gender and race; the activists expected that the slow, scientific discovery of morals would eventually render religion irrelevant. Patel calls this the thinking of “the urban liberal school of thought that expected the Vatican to become Disneyland Rome soon” (158). History contradicted that prediction. The world became still more faithful even as it became more interconnected. After realizing that the quasi-Marxist leftists he knew seemed more interested in refining their own personal interpretations (and reputations) than
in helping workers, Patel stumbled onto the anarchist Catholic Worker movement, started by the late Dorothy Day. Catholic Workers, Patel relates with palpable admiration, live in houses across the country, open both to volunteers and the materially needy. One house is connected to another only by the theological writings of Dorothy Day. Patel may be this generation’s Day. It seems to me that the interfaith youth movement about which Patel so often speaks is his Catholic Worker movement.

Patel takes pains to quote poets and prophets from multiple traditions, but it is clear that one of his favorites is Rumi. “Start a large, foolish project/ Like Noah” Rumi tells us on the first page of *Acts of Faith*, and that is what Patel has done. Patel needed not just to transform the world of faith, but also the world of interfaith. He describes interfaith conferences that blend into each other, just as their endless resolutions blend into each other, a steady rain against the roof of irrelevance. At one conference, Patel and his fellow youth delegates skip the conference sessions to dream up a new project, which comes to Patel at 3 A.M as we lie awake with him. He had been living in a progressive co-operative in an old Chicago nunnery. Why not mimic that project by wrapping Teach for America and the Jesuit Volunteer Corps into one? Young people from all religious backgrounds would live together for a year by living their vocation of service.

Patel took this idea with him to Oxford. Some of the book’s most humorous moments come as Patel feels deeply lost both at Oxford and with his fellow American Scholars. They all talked of Yale Law School and read The New Yorker. “I couldn’t even decipher the damn cover; how was I supposed to understand the articles?” (102). Within a page Patel has read the articles, and the book takes us on his re-acquaintance with the Ismaili tradition of his family and the burgeoning success of the Interfaith Youth Core, renamed from Interfaith Youth Corps because Patel began to see his organization as the center of a movement. The rest of that book traces the development of that organization and its success.
I met Patel before this book was published, although after most of its events took place, because a high school classmate and I started a group called the Muslim and Jewish Youth of Chicago. My friend and I had big dreams: to double volunteers at youth led events, to know people from another faith community to humanize the other, to establish a youth group actually run by youth. Isn’t knowing your neighbor and governing together the heart of living in a city like Chicago?

Everyone we met insisted that we bring our vision to someone called Eboo Patel.

Reading *Acts of Faith*, I remembered why everyone to whom my friend and I spoke told us to meet Patel. *Acts of Faith* is the autobiography of a great mind and a full spirit. Patel tells his reader everything from his parallel trip to mine, when his mentor insists that he bring his vision of interfaith youth cooperation to the Dalai Lama. He tells us about his frustration with traditional interfaith groups, with his problems in fundraising. But he also outdoes Chicago’s poets in describing his downright jubilee at finding “the one.” This event concludes an ongoing subplot of his book. Patel marks moments by noting whom he was dating, whether they could get along as members of different faiths, – yes, whether they could marry as members of different faiths – and how she affected his thinking.

Perhaps most importantly, Patel outlines how one goes about creating a movement in the 21st century. Patel’s genius was not to realize that the successful movements in recent human history have organized the youth; everyone talks about the importance of the youth. Synagogues and mosques, churches and temples talk about the importance of youth. We founded MAJYC out of a frustration with our own “churches,” which talked about supporting the youth and ran rather similar youth groups, but rarely allowed youth to lead. When it comes time to constitute boards and to hand out budgets, the youth are thought to survive on their importance alone. “Even people within the small interfaith movement generally treated young people’s involvement as a
sideshow,” Patel observes (127). Patel writes about his reaction to a foundation officer who suggested that Patel, who is trying to change the world, do local fundraising. “I had a sudden urge to grab him by his suit jacket and say, “Do you think Osama bin Laden built Al Qaeda on bake sales?”

The worldwide turn towards fundamentalism and religiosity has required us to rediscover the vocabulary of faith. Our best chances for human cooperation, especially in this profoundly religious republic, seem to come from the churches and the interfaith movement. Careful activists seek not to callously to strip away what nonbelievers consider superstition in the name of some supposedly universal rite. The goal instead is to merge the democratic need for political respect with the religious understanding of citizens of the church. This movement, which depends on the sharing of narratives, could benefit from both experiences and studies in sociology of religion. Patel’s movement to reinterpret religion needs Fiat Lux and fora like it to examine the essence of each faith and citizens who advocate a certain organization of the church and Yalies who understand the interaction of various religious lives here read and meet one and other and envision what the twenty-first century, drawn with the faith line, will look like. Printed on these pages, which are themselves a sort of ecumenical experiment, one may find attempts at arguments in the name of interfaith tolerance and examinations of the same. The religious movements today could move forward, religious men and women progressing together, or it could be destructive and divisive.

Theology, and the religious life conceived by it, can affect social change. So can the state. But the state’s coercion of certain virtues (say, pluralist integration) Patel would find to violate the very picture of multicultural thriving he paints. America is no longer America if she forces her citizens to get along. But a synagogue can force its citizens to get along with the citizens of a mosque down the street, for if the citizens find their rights abused, they can quit, and form a new church. And so Patel’s present project is to teach the children of each church that true doctrine loves democratic diversity and civic cooperation. If the children believe it, so will
the church, in time. But the church must find an appropriate theological explanation, which presumably will be printed on these pages. This is not a merely technical concern. Many religious leaders are hesitant to commit their youth to anything that does not make them better members of their religion. So unless someone has articulated why hosting Muslims and Buddhists makes one a good Catholic, for example, few Catholic diocese are going to be interested in telling their young Catholics to do so.

Patel couldn’t, and doesn’t, try to say that all religions are the same, but he can, and does emphasize shared values. One is service. But service is also important as an end, not just a means. It’s true that groups of youth working a soup kitchen for an hour don’t change the world. They may, in fact, drain more resources from the kitchen than they contribute. But they learn their interfaith cooperation as an inherently serving vocation.

Patel’s story, in many ways, is the story of America. In America, people of varying religions are brought together. In America they are equal, at least today, at least relative to at his family’s Indian home, at which he stops on the way to the Dalai Lama. In America, students go to school together, voters go to the polls together, and they don’t talk about their religion. They tolerate it frequently. But toleration, Patel tells us, is not good enough when you are the Jew high school bullies are hunting down and you stay angry at your buddy Eboo for years for his silence. Tolerance is not enough.

In 2005, Patel addressed the graduating class of the University of Pennsylvania, describing the arc of human history as shown in the Art Institute of Chicago, which starts. “in a dimly lit corridor displaying the various instruments that the human family has used to shed its own blood across the centuries. It is a dark walk through the swords and spears, the ancient slingshots, medieval armor, rifles and pistols. But if you continue forward a different color begins to emerge: the azure possibility of the human future as displayed in Marc Chagall’s America Windows. Mounted on those panels are symbols of freedom and welcome, work and worship, song and study, of hope of what this world could be.” Patel believes
he is a positive agent in history, with the power of religion behind him, pushing man up the hill on which is built a new city.

Patel goes to explain how one student saw interreligious service as the meaning of both Judaism and America. Patel recalls admiringly how Brother Wayne, the Catholic who sent him to the Dalai Lama, uses Hindu and Buddhist practice to strengthen his own Catholicism. Patel says that in America, “[w]e want the kingdom on earth. It was not an abstract notion of love that moved Martin King to martyrdom, it was the concrete hope of the beloved community—Christian and Muslim, Jewish and Hindu, Buddhist and Baha’i working together to make of this old world a new world. Jane Addams did not just dream a ‘cathedral of humanity.’ She built it.” King used Christianity to end racial segregation, answering the question of the race line. Patel claims that by using Christianity and Judaism and Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism, and only by using all religions, he can begin to end religious segregation, answering the biggest question of this century, the question of the faith line.

Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation
Dr. Eboo Patel
Beacon Press, 2007
$22.95, 189 pages.
Maimonides closely follows the philosophy of Aristotle in a number of places. He most often cites Aristotle by name in discussing proofs for the existence of God or a first mover and for necessary existence. Maimonides’ ideas, however, bear witness to a wider Aristotelian influence: he makes use of Aristotelian categories, of Aristotelian psychology, and of Aristotelian theories of virtue. But the end point of Maimonides’ ethical theories does not seem to align with Aristotle’s. That is, Maimonides’ God-driven philosophy presented in the Guide of the Perplexed seems to clash with our ideas about Aristotle’s anthropocentric ethics. In particular, scholars point to differences in the value of humility and anger, the existence and value of phronesis, and the possibility of character change as prime instances generating dissonant views about the role of religion in ethical life. These three areas, however, hold the key to reconciling the two systems and to perfecting our notions of them.

Daniel Frank contends that one of the prime areas of difference between Maimonides and Aristotle is their opinions about anger and humility. Oliver Leaman summarizes this argument well:

Given [Aristotle’s] lack of religious commitment, he is insufficiently cognizant of the role of notions like humility and the absence of anger as human ideals. In setting out to imitate God, the wise man (hakham) and especially the pious man (hasid) will adopt attitudes and establish dispositions that represent ideals far from a medium position.¹

This objection succeeds only if we presume a quiescent religiosity on the part of Maimonides and a humanistic braggadocio on the part of Aristotle. A virtue with reference to anger for Aristotle exists to resist slavishness on the one hand and irascibility, irritability, and
sulkiness on the other. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines “praise for someone who gets angry at the right things and with the right people, as well as in the right way, and for the right length of time” (NE IV.5, 1125b). The multitudinous circumstances involved in this virtue make it “not easy to articulate how far a person has to go in getting angry, and in what way, before he is liable to blame” (NE IV.5, 1126a). Thus we must remember that Aristotle does not praise for example the unbridled, preternatural rage of Achilles or the irascibility of Agamemnon. Rather he makes appropriate anger a virtue because “it is slavish to put up with being insulted oneself or to overlook insults to those close to one” (NE IV.5, 1126a).

Maimonides’ shifting position on this subject makes reconciling him with Aristotle difficult, though not impossible so long as we maintain a strict difference between slavishness and humility. In an early work, which Frank himself identifies as not wholly reflective of Maimonides’ developed, later position, Maimonides seems to take a strong stance against Aristotle’s account: “the good way is not that a man be merely humble, but that he have a lowly spirit, that his spirit be very submissive…it is proper for a man to move away from [anger] to the other extreme and to teach himself not to become angry, even over something it is proper to be angry about.” Maimonides’ account here seems both to conflict with Aristotle’s account of virtue and to provide exception to Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean; the self-contradictions in Maimonides’ own account and wider thought subsume this prima facie dissonance and provide a path to reconciliation.

We can excuse Maimonides for his injunction against anger even towards appropriate objects because of the different linguistic context of Aristotle’s definition. Firstly, because of Aristotle’s extreme specificity, Aristotle allows for more circumstances than simply correct object of motivation, including the recipient of anger, its duration and its method. Secondly, Aristotle does not make anger, even “correct anger,” itself his virtue; the mean with reference to anger is *praoitès*, which is usually translated as mildness or gentleness but can mean softness, tameness or even meekness. This connotative difference goes a long way to lessening the
dissagreement between the two: a gentle man sounds much more like Maimonides’ man of lowly spirit than an appropriately angry one.

Our guiding precept in reconciling Aristotle and Maimonides on this point is again to refrain from equating Aristotle’s slavishness with Maimonides’ humble absence of anger. Maimonides enjoins against anger and argues for humility because “everyone who makes his heart haughty denies the existence of God”; “anyone who is angry—it is as if he worships idols.” Anger has specific, spiritual consequences for Maimonides that it lacks for Aristotle. These consequences follow from a principle which becomes a cornerstone of Maimonides argument in the Guide, the non-corporeality of God and the denial of idolatry that lay at the core of medieval Judaism. The same principle, however, would provide reason to reject slavishness: if insult is the sacking of the Temple and the perversion of its rites, were the Maccabbees angry and if so wrong to revolt against Antiochus? Seemingly no. To Aristotle, some kind of anger is necessary to resist being another man’s slave; Maimonides too would resist slavishness because of its idolatrous consequences.

Furthermore, Aristotle would acknowledge Maimonides’ theological points about the necessity for subservience to God and hence for humility. In the Eudemian Ethics’ final chapter Aristotle describes part of the standard for the master virtue of kalokagathia (nobility, the character of goodness): “any mode of choice and acquisition that either through deficiency or excess hinders us from serving and from contemplating God—that is a bad one” (EE VIII.3 1249b). Aristotle makes the service and contemplation of God the “standard of nobility and what is the aim of things absolutely good” (EE VII.3 1249b). Hence what Maimonides calls a lowly or submissive spirit accords not with Aristotle’s ideas about anger but with his ideas about God—the guiding impetus of Maimonides’ ideas.

Taking into account the function of the divine as starting point for comparison, Maimonides’ account of anger bears similarity
to Aristotle’s description of virtue as a mean. When Maimonides gives his most extended description of anger, he appears to blatantly contradict Aristotle’s theory of the mean:

Every man whose character traits all lie in the mean is called a wise man. Whoever is exceedingly scrupulous with himself and moves a little toward one side or the other, away from the character trait in the mean, is called a pious man. How so? Whoever moves away from a haughty heart to the opposite extreme so that he is lowly in spirit is called a pious man; this is the measure of piety. If he moves only to the mean and is humble, he is called a wise man; this is the measure of wisdom.  

We must reconcile and interpret this part of Maimonides’ account because it makes this text conflict not only with Aristotle but with itself. Aristotle is very careful when expounding the doctrine of the mean: virtue is not an arithmetic mean, but “the mean relative to us” (NE II.6 1106b); further, “with regard to what is best and good it is an extreme” (NE II.6 1107a). So too in Maimonides’ account is anger: the absence of anger is an evaluative as well as descriptive extreme, piety. Piety might be for Maimonides an essential starting point for virtues of the soul; it skews the rest of Maimonides’ virtues just as kalokagathia does Aristotle’s because it introduces an intellectual, divine component into an anthropocentric value system. Maimonides might be thinking of two kinds of anger, one of which we should have none of, so that we may have piety in accordance with avoiding idolatry, another of which we should have a mean, so that we may be humble, wise, and act in imitatio Dei being “slow to anger” as the prophets described God. The first anger is a theological one which may be related to “fearing” God; the second anger is the normal reaction against insult.

Thus Maimonides and Aristotle do not disagree about anger and humility in fundamental terms first and foremost because Aristotle is not devoid of religious or spiritual sentiment or cognizance. In Book X, Aristotle defends contemplation as the chief good because
of its divine connection (NE X.7 1177b). *Eudaimonia* is regularly characterized as *makarios*, blessed, a term which has specific reference to a religious blessing (as well as one bestowed by fortune). The *Eudmeian Ethics*’ account of *kalokagathia*, with its explicit connection to a divine being, should have relationship to that given in the Nicomachean version similar to that between Maimonides’ more strictly ethical works and his grand philosophical opus, *Guide to the Perplexed*. Nonetheless, while we have shown the two accounts to be far similar than some scholars allow (i.e. Maimonides is by no anti-Aristotelian), we should remember that they are not the same accounts: Maimonides’ humility is part of an ethical system which commands forgiveness, a value which Aristotle refrains from championing per se; Aristotle’s God, moreover, while an ordering influence on his noble man, “is not a ruler in the sense of issuing commands, but is the End as a means to which wisdom gives commands” (EE VIII.3 1249b). These differences become clearer and less significant as we explore other areas of purported conflict between the two philosophers.

The role of phronesis in living an ethical life has been cited as an area of profound disjoint between Maimonides and Aristotle. Jonathan Jacobs maintains that “it is striking that while there is so much evidence of Aristotle’s influence, Maimonides does not recognize practical wisdom as a virtue.” Jacobs’ surprise and much of his argument relies on a faulty characterization of Aristotle’s view and a lack of appreciation for the “perplexing” qualities Maimonides builds into his writings. Jacobs’ simply says that “for Aristotle, [practical wisdom] is the master ethical virtue.” Like the oft-heard summary that for Aristotle, virtue is a habit, this statement is inaccurate and obscures the clarity of Aristotle’s position along with most of its nuance.

Firstly, let us be precise about the term virtue itself. Virtue is how the Greek *aretê* is customarily translated. *Aretê* itself denotes more excellence generally than moral virtue exclusively. That is, *aretê* does not always mean an excellence that denotes an individual’s moral worth. An *aretê* could be had in reference to running. The virtues that we normally say that Aristotle is talking about when
he discusses a life of eudaimonia are more literally translated as excellences of character: they are dispositions of the soul (hexeis) from which we will consistently act in the right way. Practical wisdom is not a virtue in the sense that it is not an excellence of character; it may be described as an aretê, but not an “ethical virtue.” It is an enabler of the virtues of character but only in the sense that “we cannot be really good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character” (NE VI.13 1144b). Practical wisdom is necessary because while virtues of character “set the end,” phronesis “makes us do what is towards the end” (NE VI.13 1145a). Thus Aristotle does not make practical wisdom “the master ethical virtue.” Jacobs better describes it when he equates it to “a true grasp of what is good” which allows us to do good.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, if Aristotle does identify a master virtue, it is kalokagathia, not phronesis.

Secondly, Maimonides’ subordination of ethical virtue to rational virtue in no way conflicts with Aristotle. Maimonides summarizes moral virtue as being “only the disposition to be useful to people; consequently it is an instrument for someone else.”\textsuperscript{12} Aristotle might be thought to disagree: in Book I of the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, he identifies virtue with a happiness that “is never worth choosing for the sake of something else” (NE I.7 1097a)—that is, complete—and that “on its own makes life worthy of choice” (NE I.7 1097b)—that is, self sufficient.

However, Aristotle’s use of self-sufficiency and completeness in regard to the chief good changes in Book X: contemplation is self-sufficient because “the wise person can contemplate even when he is by himself, the more so the wiser he is” (NE X.7 1177a); contemplation is complete to a greater extent than virtues performed in politics and war (i.e. dispositions to be useful to people) because those virtues “are not worthy of choice for their own sake” (NE X.7 1177b). The biggest change is that from a material and inherent self-sufficiency in the first case and a self-sufficiency of isolation on the other. Aristotle seems to favor the argument he advances last since it forms his conclusion, but its seeming contradiction with the rest of his work has led scholars to urge a particulate form
of choiceworthiness which safeguards the independent, inherent value of the excellence of character as does Jacobs in his attempt to enumerate differences between the two philosophers. This construct makes Aristotle’s chief good a dominant one, which emerges amongst many competing prospects, rather than an inclusive or architectonic one which orders and animates all other goods. Aristotle’s own requirements, however, suggest that the chief good is that at which all human actions aim, and hence the best account of it is one that makes it inclusive. The search for an inclusive good leads both Aristotle and Maimonides to the same conclusion with regard to contemplation and virtue.

When Maimonides subordinates ethical virtues to rational ones, his reasoning closely parallels Aristotle’s in Book X. Maimonides writes, “if you suppose a human individual is alone, acting on no one, you will find that all his moral virtues are in vain and without employment and unneeded, and that they do not perfect the individual in anything; for he only needs them and they again become useful to him in regard to someone else” (Guide, III.54, p. 635). So too does Aristotle writes that “the just person will need people as associates in and objects of his just actions, and the same is true of the temperate person, the courageous person and each of the others; but the wise person can contemplate even when he is by himself, the more so the wiser he is” (NE X.7 1177a). In the consideration of the individual alone, apart from societal contact, Aristotle and Maimonides agree in the superiority of rational perfection. Aristotle thus openly declares in tones which echo two thousand years later in Maimonides’ work: “life in accordance with the other kind of virtue [ethical virtue] is happy in a secondary way” (NE X.8 1178a). Aristotle’s practical wisdom thus does not contradict Maimonides’ ordered system of differing kind of perfection; on the contrary, the two are almost precisely congruent when we remember that Aristotle does not limit himself to anthropocentric ethics.

However, phronesis does create tensions between Maimonides and Aristotle. Jacobs sums up the main debacle quite well: “the role that practical wisdom fulfills for Aristotle, in making ethical
requirements accessible is, in Maimonides’ view, performed by
the Law, the revealed will of God.” We find this contradiction
when we recall Aristotle’s conception of God in the Eudeman
Ethics: “God is not the ruler in the sense of issuing commands, but
is the End as a means to which [phronesis] gives commands” (EE
VIII.3 1249b). Commandments, however, are an important part
not only of Judaism, but also of Maimonides’ thought: the concept
of commandments is crucial to understand Maimonides’ moral
psychology. In I.2 of the Guide, Maimonides buttresses his assertion
of man’s having intellect by pointing to God’s commanding him:
“It was likewise on account of [his intellect] that he was address by
God and given commandments...for commandments are not given
to beasts and beings devoid of intellect” (Guide, I.2, p. 24). That
commandments are given indicates not just the free will of man’s
intellect and but also a statement about the ends best for man.

The fact that Maimonides’ God gives commandments and
Aristotle’s God does not create a significant difference. Aristotle
demurs from characterizing his God as such because he thinks that
it would make God needful of something and hence undermine his
perfection. Maimonides does not think that a commanding, active
God is a less perfect one; rather God’s commandments (and hence
his Law) guide his people in the good life and can be viewed as an
aspect of divine providence. Practical wisdom commands in a very
different way from God; practical wisdom only supplies means to
a virtuous heart. Commandments in Maimonides provide tests of
faith and conduits to God. Aristotle denies that God commands
because he does not mean to suggest that the source of virtue lies
outside of us in any way; this parallels’ Maimonides belief in the
nature of commandments. Commandments do not undermine
our free choice but reinforce it by interacting with our intellect
and by requiring adhesion (i.e. by forcing us to make a choice as to
whether to uphold them). Aristotle ascribes commanding power
to practical wisdom only in the sense that he uses the provision
“virtue in accord with right reason” to enable him to apply rational
thought and voluntary choice to the process of virtue itself.

Furthermore, a desire to ensure something like the non-
corporeality of God motivates Aristotle’s denial of a commanding God. When Aristotle says that a commanding God, a God who is like a ruler, would be less perfect, he has in mind not the intellectual injunctions of Maimonides’ law codes, but a physical God who issues commands with a specter and the force of arms. Aristotle’s aversion from such a portrait parallels Maimonides careful description in II.48 of the Guide about the different types of commandments. Aristotle may even be more cognizant of the potential anthropomorphism in a commanding than Maimonides. That the denial of corporeality animates both philosophers stands as substantial proof of their fundamental congruency.

Thus Maimonides and Aristotle do not disagree about the importance of practical wisdom because they both agree about the primary importance of rational, intellectual activity and about the role for the divine to be played in such activity. A central part of coming to this point of view is again recognizing that Aristotle does not construct or endorse an ethical life for human beings that does not take into account things that are superior to human life. We must also take care to remember that Maimonides does not alter the metaphysical status of Jewish Law simply because he believes it to be divinely sanctioned and correct. The Law of Moses includes commandments and statues which operate in two realms: the realm of commandments, the sphere of generally accepted knowledge in which we come by moral virtue, and the realm of statutes, the sphere which “were [it] not for the law, would not be bad at all.”

In sum, “a commandment communicates a correct belief” (Guide, III.29, p. 514) just as Aristotle believes the observation of a phronimos will teach us what is good and virtuous. While Maimonides makes Law a central part of his ethical life and of his examination of good, Aristotle reserves a special place for law in creating the kinds of habits that allow virtue and contemplation to flourish (see NE X.9). The prima facie differences between the two philosophers in this regard emerge from their different cultures, backgrounds, and times, but such differences do not impinge on their ability to substantively and fundamentally agree with each other.

The last subject of scholarly dispute we will investigate is the
capacity for change in Aristotle and Maimonides. Simply put, scholars put forward the argument that Aristotle’s virtues proceeding from fixed dispositions of character puts Aristotle at odds with Maimonides’ system which allows for repentance and expects the vicious to be able to change their actions.

Aristotle, however, uses the potential for change as an evaluative criterion: “The intemperate person, as we said, is not the sort to have regrets…but every incontinent person is the sort to have regrets...the intemperate person is incurable, while the incontinent is curable” (NE VII.8 1150b). Thus the incontinent person is “better” because we can change him and he can change himself, both of which Aristotle tacitly assumes should be done. Aristotle acknowledges the possibility of change, but perhaps not its probability or its ease; indeed, the entire metaphor of the chief good “aiming” at something includes the tacit conception of the individual as an active agent in crafting the aim. Aristotle’s final praise of friendship is that the friendship of good people makes the friends “become better through their activity and their improving each other, because each takes impressions from the other of what meets with his approval, which gives rise to the saying, ‘From noble people nobility…[sic]’” (NE IX.12 1172a). Thus we cannot say that Aristotle’s fixity of ethical disposition precludes change as a component of ethical life because Aristotle consistently praises and thus allows for self-wrought betterment.

Nevertheless, Maimonides’ views on repentance and forgiveness include a self-criticism that may stand out from Aristotle’s account on first appearance: “the perfect man needs to inspect his moral habits continually, weigh his actions, and reflect upon the state of his soul every single day.”16 From this continual concern follows the frequent practice of “curing” oneself when one observes a deviation towards an extreme of vice. The problem for Aristotle is that his virtuous man’s character should prevent any such deviation. The virtuous man is temperate; he knows, desires, and does what is right.

Our account, however, becomes fixed only if we fail to take to
include Aristotle’s portrait of weakness of the will. For Aristotle, every choice involves an internal competition between major and minor premises:

When the one universal belief is present in the person deterring him from tasting, along with the other that everything is sweet is pleasant, as well as the belief that this is sweet—and it is the latter that is activated—and when appetite happens to be present within him, one belief bids him avoid this, but appetite leads him on, since it can move each of our bodily parts. So it happens that reason and belief in a way make him act incontinent. (NE VII.3 1147a).

Here appetite influences which of our beliefs motivate us; we act on one belief while still retaining the other, just as we retain it while sleeping. Now the virtuous man, it is true, has appetites that always chose the correct premise, but the contest still occurs; there is a continuous possibility of failure, particularly in the introduction of new circumstances to which we are not habituated. The virtuous man requires a steady hand on the wheel of his soul; he is not a magical ship that will follow any wind and any sea to a safe harbor. We must remember that a single bad action, a single instance of improper desire, does not undermine a man’s virtue because of the very fixity at issue: virtue is a state of character from which we consistently chose the good; hence, virtue is characterized by habits. Conversely, if we did one bad thing, that action would not be sufficient to constitute a bad habit nor would it be sufficient to indicate a change in our fundamental character. Thus the virtuous man can experience a temporary bad action, a sin, as it were. Because Aristotle exhorts the good man to relate to himself as to a friend (NE IX.4 1166a), the good man has the necessary means by which to reflect on the composure of his soul and ensure that his particular actions align which his soul and his character.

Furthermore, if we examine Aristotle’s account of weakness of the will again and more closely we can see how it not only allows, but
requires continual self-examination and remediation. Aristotle solves the difficulty of weakness of the will by delineating two kinds of knowledge, normally referred to as active and passive. However, Aristotle refers to this difference by saying διοσει το εχοντα μεν μη θεωρουντα δε και το θεωρουντα α μη δει πραττειν [του εχοντα και θεωρουντα] (“it will make a difference whether someone doing what he should not has knowledge but is not contemplating it” 1146b33-4). Thus an intellectual principle is necessary to keep the correct knowledge in mind in order to do the right thing, but whether this principle is phronesis or sophia is unclear. Phronesis is true supposition about “correctness with regard to what is useful towards the end” (NE VII.9 1142b); it is thus instrumental, pertaining to the linking up of chains of syllogisms of major (universal) and minor (particular) premises. Keeping in mind the knowledge necessary to motivate action on the correct syllogism, however, does not necessarily seem to fall under the domain of phronesis. The use of θεωρουντα, moreover, suggests that keeping in mind such knowledge is accomplished through contemplation since it is the same word Aristotle uses in Book X.7 to denote contemplating. Furthermore, we can take this a step further by saying that “there is nothing the phronimos lacks to carry on properly, except the self-conscious, explicitly articulated placing of his knowledge in a reasoned whole.” The latter self-conscious act seems to be something of the kind of “end-keeping” to which Aristotle in his account of weakness of the will refers and congruent to the self reflection Maimonides requires of the perfect man. Such an act also agrees with the Eudemian Ethics appeal to contemplation of the divine as the proper ruling factor to guide the noble gentleman: “Whatever mode of choosing and of acquiring things good by nature...will best promote the contemplation of god, that is the best mode” (EE VIII.3 1249b). Thus Aristotle both allows and encourages self-reflection and self-stewardship by means of the very fixity that scholars take as our present impediment; his mechanism for doing so, contemplation, aligns with the intellectual pursuits characteristic of Maimonides’ perfect man and with Maimonides’ ordering of the different kinds of perfection.
Nevertheless, Maimonides presents further tensions in his account of evil because of the role he ascribes to knowledge: “these great evils that come about between human individuals...all derive from ignorance, I mean from a privation of knowledge” (Guide, III.11, p. 440). In his messianic vision, Maimonides believes that “if there were knowledge, whose relation to the human form is like that of the faculty of sight to the eye, they would refrain from doing any harm to themselves and to others” (Guide, III.11, p. 441). This view of knowledge appears to contradict the very point we just examined in Aristotle; that is, the insufficiency of knowledge to lead to good action because of weakness of the will. However, Maimonides in this statement does not contradict the psychology of incontinence. He laments the lack of existence of certain kinds of knowledge without which no man could be good, whatever the status of his appetites. Aristotle’s exhortation that the virtuous man take an interest in law-making has a similar inspiration: the need to perfect society at large, rather than the individual.

Indeed, the fact that Aristotle feels this lack furthers the potential for agreement between him and Maimonides: much of the source of their disagreement derives from Maimonides’ possession and adherence to a law which Aristotle did not know, or at least never recorded an opinion on. Aristotle leaves room thus for Maimonides to use this Law to enhance his own philosophy. Whether Aristotle would endorse Jewish Law does not matter; that Aristotle’s philosophy allows it to be incorporated enables Maimonides to agree with Aristotle almost completely. Hence Aristotle allows for self-reflection and repentance just as Maimonides allows for the possibility of new knowledge to aid human perfection. Aristotle and Maimonides do not disagree on the role of repentance and reflection because of the prime role Aristotle gives to contemplation in weakness of the will.

These three disparate areas of Aristotelian and Maimonidean philosophy have all shown deep, fundamental sources of agreement between Aristotle and Maimonides. Crucial to this agreement is the role of religion. In The Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides makes religion and divine speculation his core
subject and comments obliquely on ethical concerns; in both his *Ethics*, Aristotle primarily studies excellences of character as they relate to the human good, but he ultimately concludes that happiness in human affairs requires not only excellent character, but also a relationship with divine things and thus the activity of contemplation. Reading Aristotle in such a light is much more controversial than reading Maimonides in an Aristotelian ethical one; many scholars of Aristotle might dispute such a reading, but I do not think Maimonides would. The study of Aristotle in conjunction with the study of theology must have reinforced for Maimonides the role of God in Aristotle and the potential for the role of religion in his predecessor’s philosophy.

An Aristotelian scholar might object to a reading of Aristotle which renders his philosophy perplexing, though Maimonides would presumably would not and might be particularly suited to agree with it; indeed, scholars might allege that such a reading is trying to force him into the mold of Maimonides. Much of Aristotle’s method is grounded in an effort to reinforce the wisdom we already have (hence the term “endoxic”): he makes use of the metaphor of a racecourse to exhort us to begin from what we know and tacitly presuming that we will return to it having learned the reason in the course of philosophy (see NE I.4 1095a). However, I believe that Maimonides’ concept of perplexion has an ample place in reading Aristotle: though he is touted as a philosopher of ordinary language, Aristotle frequently determines that no term for a specific virtue exists, allowing his theory to endure, just as Maimonides devotes much of his time in the *Guide* to pointing out the equivalence of Biblical terms in order to show how they accord with his philosophy. Though Aristotle is praised for his systematic approach, in his ethical works he confounds that system; if we are not to call him incompetent or short-sighted, we can only say that Book X’s endorsement of contemplation in the context of the earlier books renders Aristotle’s ethic willfully perplexing.

On the other hand, some scholars allege that Maimonides in the *Guide* deviates from Aristotle and embraces Platonism because of its incorporation of revelation; hence perplexion is simply the
result of a more Platonic epistemology. While revelation as a point of contrast between Aristotle and Maimonides may hold weight, Maimonides’ metaphor for revelation in the Guide has profoundly Aristotelian overtones in comparison with Plato. Maimonides compares sages and their knowledge of secrets (i.e. the extent of their revelation) to a lightning storm: “We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lighting flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light” (Guide, I.1, p. 7). Contrast this metaphor with Plato’s description of the form of the Good in the Republic, which makes the form into the sun. Making knowledge into lightning uses a Platonic metaphor towards Aristotelian ends: it makes light into a particular—the theme of Aristotelian epistemology—rather than a general or universal phenomenon. Thus even at his most Platonic allusion, Maimonides remains grounded in an Aristotelian tradition.

Therefore we can conclude that the potential for agreement between Aristotle and Maimonides is quite wide. Even when they appear in contrast, a deep examination of their accounts will unearth a more significant point upon which they harmonize and agree. That they disagree we can explain by their separation temporally and culturally; the extent to which they agree is the extent to which both transcends their own specific contextual moments. We should refrain from saying that they agree in everything: for example, revelation per se or the distinction of an ethics of true and false and one of received opinion may present greater difficulties in resolution than those we have examined. Nevertheless, we have safely determined the deep agreement regarding the role of religion in many of its most important particulars: virtues of humility, the role of Law and God, and the necessity for repentance in a perfect life.
Notes
5 Ibid., notes 8 and 12.
7 Maimonides, Laws Concerning Character Traits in Ethical Writings, 29-31.
8 Ibid., 30.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
16 “Eight Chapters,” chp. 4 in Ethical Writings, 73.
17 I have used the Bywater edition which includes the phrase in brackets.
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