

Discussion Guide for

***Dangerous Religious Ideas:
The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism,
Christianity, and Islam***

by Rachel S. Mikva

**Compiled by Rebecca S. Blackburn
November 2020**

Welcome

We hope this Discussion Guide is a helpful resource as you engage *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. It is designed for discussion group facilitators, with selected quotes, questions, and exercises to stimulate lively and thoughtful conversation. It may also be useful for an individual reader, serving as a conversation partner.

There are four sections in the Guide, following the four sections of the book. If you have only a single session to discuss the book, you might consider focusing on the material in shaded boxes, or simply select parts that you feel are most relevant for your group. As you review the material, feel free to tweak the questions and exercises so that they will work well for your context.

Note: Throughout the Discussion Guide, there are many questions about participants' religious tradition or experiences with religious community. Recognizing the vast range of spiritual lifestances, participants are encouraged to interpret these questions as broadly or narrowly as they desire in order to engage meaningfully in discussion.

Part I: Dangerous Religious Ideas

Mikva says, "[I]n some elemental way, the productive and destructive materials of religious thought are bound up together.... What makes religion a powerful force for good is to a large extent the same as what makes it potentially dangerous" (p. 6).

For discussion:

1. What are examples of dangerous religious ideas? Take a few minutes to generate as many ideas as you can. (With "whose" ideas did you start?)
2. What are the positive and perilous aspects of these ideas? One example discussed in the book is the power of religion to form community, which simultaneously creates an "other" who is not part of it. How have you seen this dynamic play out? Can you think of other examples?
3. How does Mikva's assertion shape, support, or challenge your thinking about religion?

Mikva asserts, "All religious ideas are dangerous, and self-critical faith is essential. It is my contention that most religions of the world have known it all along. This book is not simply a reading of scripture and tradition that tries to call out the threats and resist them. It is a reading of scripture and tradition that see the seeds for this work planted deep in the soil of religious thought, designed for us to cultivate. Aware of religion's tremendous power both to harm and to heal, with no way to permanently separate these potentialities, the traditions transmit their sacred stories alongside tools for penetrating self-examination and ongoing self-improvement." (p. 6).

For discussion:

1. How would you define self-critical faith? Why is it important?
2. How can the metaphor of seed and soil further our understanding of self-critical faith? Are there other metaphors you find helpful?

Mikva also states: "The inheritance of self-critical faith challenges religious leaders to be more thoughtful in teaching and preaching within their communities, and more cognizant of the potential damage religious concepts—even those that lie at the heart of the faith—can do. It challenges skeptics to see the tools of self-critical faith as vital resources for contemporary discourse, both secular and religious. It asks adherents, wherever they identify on the progressive-traditional spectrum, to recognize the dangers of spiritual complacency. A mature engagement with religion, one capable of nurturing its full potential for bringing blessing into the world, must face forthrightly the shadow side and claim it as its own" (p. 7).

For discussion:

1. Can you think of examples of self-critical faith in your own life and/or modeled by others? What was the impact?
2. Can you think of examples where self-critical faith is/was plainly missing? Describe the impact.

In regard to interreligious engagement Mikva states: *“The shared struggle of self-critical faith is the essential glue of a diverse society”* (p. 8). She adds that, because of religion’s role in public life, *“we have to learn how to do this work together, subjecting other people’s religious ideas to rigorous scrutiny as well, and without prejudice”* (pp. 11-12).

Later on, Mikva reminds us, *“Encouraging debate about religious ideas certainly carries dangers of its own, but to ask tough questions is not to belittle. It is not an invitation to demonstrate religious bigotry or reengage in medieval battles between claimants of the ‘true faith.’ Pointing out the critical distinction between condemn and contemn, Cathleen Kaveny urged a public discourse that is not afraid to express strong disapproval, without characterizing opponents as despicable”* (p. 197).

For discussion:

1. How can self-critical faith act as glue for a diverse society?
2. What are the dangers of public scrutiny of religious ideas? What are the positive potentials?
3. In what ways have you seen religious ideas critiqued in public? Can you share examples of critiques that avoided prejudice and belittling?

Suggested Exercise: (approximately 15 minutes)

In the last part of the Introduction, Mikva takes time to explain how her context and commitments influence this book. The following activity provides an opportunity to reflect on your own context and commitments, and how they may influence your engagement with this book.

1. Working individually at first, take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions:
 - a. Do you consider yourself a religious person? Do you identify with a particular tradition? If so, what are your commitments within that tradition? If not, with what religious tradition(s) are you most familiar?
 - b. What kind of teaching, training, or education have you received regarding that tradition? Who has taught you?
 - c. Broadly speaking, how does your experience with that tradition inform your imagination of the divine, of morality, and of humanity? What are the multiple sources that shape your values?
 - d. What is your knowledge of and feelings about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?
2. Find a conversation partner and share some of your reflections.

Chapter 2 explores the words *dangerous*, *religious*, and *ideas* in more detail. In unpacking the word "dangerous" Mikva states, *"The dangers include not only violence, but also emotional, psychological, physical, and social harm. They may be imposed directly by an individual or community, or create an oppressive culture that impairs the well-being of those who do not accord with its values. They may be inflicted by religious or secular institutions, by legal or suspect means. They may jump out of the book, the pulpit, the street, or one's home, or they may linger discreetly in symbol, music, metaphors, hopes, and dreams"* (p. 18)

For discussion:

1. Think about some of the religious ideas you listed as dangerous. What kind of dangers do they present?

Mikva uses the metaphor of fire to describe religion since they both can serve destructive or desirable purposes (pp.17-18). Rather than looking for a universal formula to predict danger, Mikva says, *"I prefer to examine specific iterations, looking for strategies more than conclusions: how might we locate and extinguish the destructive fires that religion can ignite?"* (p. 18).

For discussion:

1. Think about some of the religious ideas you listed as dangerous. What strategies can we use to locate and extinguish their destructive fires? Are there proactive "fire-tending" strategies, too?

Mikva talks about the multiple ways that religion "works" in human life and society (pp. 21-27). Examples include:

- will to pleasure: self-gratification through pleasurable religious experiences
- will to power: power over others and/or self-mastery
- will to meaning: the need to discover meaning in our experiences
- human community: the social function of religion; belonging
- custodians of cultural values: religion's influence over cultural symbols, stories, laws, customs, ideas, patterns of thought, institutions, etc.
- human evolution: religion as the product and facilitator of human adaptation over time

For discussion:

1. Which of these seem most prominent in your own religious experience? Can you share examples?
2. Collectively, these ways in which religion "works" have great power. How has each been both a healing and a harmful influence?

In thinking about the impact of religious ideas, Mikva focuses on how they are translated into behavior and action, especially through interpretation of sacred text, ritual, and community practice (pp. 28-30). She closes the chapter with a quote from Swami Vivekananda: *“Religion is realisation, not talk, not doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion”* (pp. 30-31).

For discussion:

1. Mikva points out that there is substantial relationship between interpretation of sacred text and religious observance, with frequent arguments about the meaning of specific passages. Can you share examples of debated scriptures and how adherents variously seek to apply them?
2. Mikva discusses prayer as a ritual that is both a religious idea (containing multiple religious ideas within) and an action. Can you think of rituals that seem to have dangerous potential in the ways they translate ideas into action? (Try to focus on your own rather than those in other traditions.)
3. How do you see religious ideas influencing (for good and ill) culture, perhaps through social and economic policy, international relations, artistic expression, learning styles, work habits, family dynamics, social customs, etc.?

Section I Reflection: Mikva lays the foundations for understanding dangerous religious ideas and self-critical faith. What stood out to you in this section?

Part II: Scripture

Mikva states: *“The idea of scripture is dangerous. As long as there is scripture, people will wield the word as a weapon against each other in order to justify their biases. As long as there is scripture, we have to reckon with the painful silences of those left out of the canon. As long as there is scripture, some people will turn their back on other God-given ways of knowing”* (p. 36). Reminding us that it is impossible to remove the human element from the way we interpret scripture, Mikva also identifies that *“one danger of scripture’s ultimacy is that it takes human perspectives and grants them divine authority”* (p. 39).

For discussion:

1. Here Mikva names examples of how the idea of scripture can be dangerous. How do these relate to your own experience and perspective?
2. Can you think of specific examples of each of these dangerous possibilities?
3. How is recognizing the human element an important part of self-critical faith?

In these chapters Mikva identifies tools of self-critical faith transmitted within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for engaging sacred texts. Among them are:

- awareness that **multivocality** has always been a part of scripture and its interpretation
- acknowledging the **human role in discerning the word**, raising questions about the nature of religious truth
- **epistemological humility**, recognizing the limits of human understanding
- **doubt** as an essential element of faith
- **consciousness of historical change**, understanding that scriptural interpretation is intended to evolve
- **accommodation**, understanding divine revelation to be adapted to the capacity of those who receive it

For discussion:

1. Do any of these tools for self-critical faith surprise you? Why?
2. What is your experience with these tools? How have you used them or seen them at work within a religious community?
3. Consider what might be considered the opposite of each of these attitudes. Is arrogance the opposite of epistemological humility? Certainty? Trust in the fullness of human understanding? What is your experience with these opposite approaches? How have you used them or seen them at work within a religious community?

It might be helpful to review examples of the above tools in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Below is a list of “snapshots” that exemplify a diversity of approaches across the traditions. They certainly do not represent the whole of a tradition, nor do they necessarily belong exclusively to only one of the traditions.

Multivocality:

- In Judaism, texts such as the Mishnah and the Talmud establish the value of conflicting perspectives and dialectical argument (pp. 47-48).
- Within the Christian tradition, Origen saw heresies as choices resulting from the sincere efforts of intelligent individuals to resolve questions for the benefit of human life (p. 61).
- The Qur'an states: "*And we have sent down the Book to you with truth, confirming and conserving the previous Books. So judge between them by what Allah has sent down and do not follow their whims and desires deviating from the Truth that has come to you. We have appointed a law and a practice for every one of you. Had Allah willed, he would have made you a single community, but He wanted to test you regarding what has come to you. So compete with each other in doing good (5:48)*" (p. 71).

The Nature of Truth and Human Authority:

- Some rabbis imagined that God had given the sages the privilege to *constitute* the meaning of scripture, yielding communal decisions but not absolute truth. Others held that scripture is meant to convey God's own truth but certain knowledge had eroded over time due to harsh conditions and human failings (pp. 52-53).
- Various strands of the Christian tradition upheld sources of authority in addition to scripture, including tradition, reason, experience, and conscience (p. 66).
- "*Certain principles of Islamic law carved out space for human authority. One was the notion that the formal obligations commanded in sacred texts are few, designed to give adherents the freedom to exercise their autonomous and communal judgments in many matters, especially those that do not involve one's obligations to God. Consequently, areas governed by the certainty of divine truth were limited*" (p. 78).

Epistemological Humility:

- The medieval Jewish scholar, Moses Maimonides was among those who emphasized that we can make no true affirmative statement about the nature of the divine. He also established a distinction between faith and certainty (p.55).
- Augustine and others within the Christian tradition spoke of "learned ignorance," which recognizes the limitations of human understanding and therefore makes room for multiple schools of thought. James Heft adds that this approach in the Abrahamic traditions "*prevents all forms of fundamentalism, which assumes that believers are in perfect possession of ultimate reality*" (p. 68).
- In eighth century Islam, the teaching of *irja* (deferment) "*taught that judgment belongs to God and opposed accusing each other of unbelief based on disputes about theology or praxis*" (p. 72).

Doubt:

- Mikva relays a "*strange rabbinic ruling*" that promoted rigorous dialectical engagement with truth and doubt: "*If the Sanhedrin unanimously arrived at a death sentence, they would not carry it out. Only when doubts force rigorous investigation of all possible considerations, can one arrive at the truth (Lev Avot on m. Avot 5:17)*" (p. 50). The

sixteenth century Jewish teacher known as the Maharshah believed sacred texts to have endless room for both exploration and doubt. (p. 55).

- Many in the Christian tradition attest that doubt can deepen our desire to learn. Theologian Peter Abelard wrote, *“By doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we perceive the truth”* (p. 68).
- Intisar Rabb wrote that Islam *“canonized, textualized, and generalized an Islamic doctrine of doubt.”* While the tradition *“promoted a core idea of divine legislative supremacy...the nuance with which medieval Muslim jurists approached that ideal is shrouded in a history not of certainty, but of doubt”* (p. 79).

Accommodation:

- Ibn Ezra was one of the medieval Jewish scholars who believed divine revelation was adapted to ancient Israel’s capacity to receive it. Like the rabbinic notion that *“the meaning of scripture shifts for each person, according to capacity or temperament,”* it can temper claims of scriptural ultimacy and open the door for change (pp. 56-57).
- William of Auvergne, Bishop of Paris from 1228-1249, *“described scripture as a divine textbook for all levels of students, with deliberate multiplicity. He used a range of metaphors: a mine with distinct veins of precious metals, a garden of delights, a wine cellar, a medicine chest, a table set with a rich assortment of different dishes where each guest finds food that appeal most”* (pp. 69-70).
- Within Islam, the principle of gradualism grows out of the broader tradition of contextualization. *“There are three different instructions related to drinking alcohol, for example: a warning that it is sinful (albeit with some benefits, 2:219), a limitation (not to pray while drunk, 4:43), and an outright prohibition (5:90). Rather than view these contradictory verses as an error, they are seen as a mercy, gradually weaning people from drinking wine”* (p. 80).

Consciousness of Historical Change:

- A Talmudic *aggadah* *“imagines Moses sitting in Rabbi Akiba’s classroom in the second century CE. He is completely lost and has to sit in the back (the sign of a beginner). When one of the students asks Rabbi Akiba for the source of his knowledge, however, Akiba replies, “It is from Moses on Sinai,” and Moses is comforted (b. Menah. 29b)”* (pp. 57-58).
- Origen believed that divine revelation shifted as the community had capacity to receive it. Even as he believed Jesus’ incarnation to have guided the faithful from flesh to spirit, so he believed the new covenant *“would be superseded when the people grew ready for a full realization of heavenly truth”* (p. 69).
- *...Umar, the second ‘rightly guided caliph’ (583-644 CE), adjusted religious praxis in light of shifting circumstances. He suspended the hudud punishments for theft in a year of drought, recognizing how scarcity drove people to desperation”* (pp. 81-82).

Mikva asserts, *“Differences in the way we read sacred texts continue to matter because interpretation is a political act. It has implications for the ways in which we construct society, the rules we establish for living together, and the world we try to create....Every interpretation is arguably political—in the academy, the congregation, and the public square—because it relates to the exercise of power....Ideologies that undergird interpretation are perhaps most evident in today’s highly polarized public square, which connects scripture and politics in diverse ways. It is also a space where the dangers of scripture show”* (pp. 87-88).

For discussion:

1. Can you describe examples of how scripture functions in the public square?
2. What are the positive and negative impacts in each instance?
3. What do these examples reveal about different approaches to interpretation of scripture?

“Increasingly aware that no one is exempt from contextual biases in exegesis, many researchers recognize how impossible it is to distinguish what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza elegantly called ‘the script’ from ‘the Scripture’—what within our sacred texts and traditions is culturally influenced or historically limited, versus what is divine and eternal. Their discernment is itself culturally conditioned” (p. 86).

For discussion:

1. In Chapter 2, Mikva outlines issues of scriptural interpretation that surrounded debates around slavery (p. 37). Proslavery forces cited explicit biblical verses that seemed to support slavery, while those against slavery invoked biblical themes of liberation, love, and equality. While acknowledging that there are often other forces driving debates like these (such as racism, capitalism, etc.), the controversy between “the script” and “the Scripture” is highly visible. What contemporary public debates reflect this struggle?
2. We all imagine that we can distinguish the "script" from the "Scripture." What criteria do you use, and what are the sources for those values?

Section II Reflection: What tools for self-critical faith stood out to you in this section?

Part III: Chosenness and Election, Supersession and Salvation

Mikva observes that *“chosenness does not mean the same thing in each tradition, nor does it have a single significance within any one of them”* (p. 96). Ultimately, it becomes an interwoven web of concepts, including Christian claims regarding election and salvation, and Muslim claims to supersede previous monotheistic traditions.

For discussion:

1. How are themes of chosenness and election defined or understood in your religious community?
2. What does it mean to you?

Conquest and evaluation of difference are two problems that can emerge from ideas of chosenness and election. Mikva notes that conquest can be physical, such as the depiction of Israel’s wars against the Canaanites, or the early development of the Islamic empire (p. 96). Conquest can also be spiritual. For example, though western colonialism is a prime example of physical conquest, it was often linked to a spiritual conquest of converting “heathens” to Christianity (p. 97).

For discussion:

1. Think about your religious community’s music, art, liturgies, rituals, teachings, and practice. Can you identify any hints of spiritual or physical conquest, even if you feel that they are motivated by love? (Think about how they are perceived, not how they are intended.)

Though difference is *“a building block of the way we think”* (p. 98), Mikva warns that it often leads to presumptions of inequality and efforts to assert power: *“Assertion of dominance depends on the creation of an ‘other.’ Self and other are mutually constituted”* (p. 99).

For discussion:

1. In your religious community, who becomes “other”? How are they perceived?
2. Think about the stories, teachings, and rituals of your tradition. How do they define those inside your community over against religious “others?”

In the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, teachings emerged throughout history that expressed chosenness and election in terms of conquest and negative evaluation of difference. Yet embedded in each tradition there were also **teachings that reflected self-critical capacities** and developed alternative ways of thinking. For example,

- In the Hebrew Bible there is abundant anti-Canaanite polemic, creating a clear negative evaluation of difference and seemingly justifying physical conquest. Later rabbinic literature, however, associated war with human wickedness and valorized peace. Heroes were those who mastered Torah and cultivated spiritual virtuosity (pp. 109-110).
- Christian violence against pagans and Jews (and later Muslims) was often grounded on convictions of the singular truth of Christianity and its ideas of election to salvation. In contrast, some Church Fathers supported notions of universal salvation, believing that everyone can be restored to friendship with God (*apokatastasis*—some parts of the Eastern Church sustain these teachings). More recently, Vatican II's *Nostra aetate* (1965) recognized the harm supersession has wrought and sought to engage more constructively with Judaism and Islam, and various Protestant denominations have followed suit (pp. 125, 168).
- Similar to Christianity, some teachings within Islam claim that it is the universal faith which supersedes previous revelations and monotheistic traditions. Some *ayat* (verses in Qur'an) have been used to justify violence against non-Muslims as well as Muslim leaders judged insufficiently committed to the faith. Yet other passages in Qur'an promote nonviolence and pluralist peace. As part of Muslim mystical tradition, Sufi voices often spoke of transcending religious boundaries (pp. 142-43, 148).

Within each tradition, Mikva also notes **important blessings that emerge from ideas like chosenness and election**: *"...[E]lection also provides the traditions with valuable sustenance, helping to fashion the boundaries of community and solidify its glue. Beyond the raw survival advantage of a strong group identity, it instills a sense of purpose among adherents. God has a stake in their embodiment of the divine promise and supports their endeavors"* (p. 101).

- In Jewish thought, God intends for diversity to flourish in the world, and chosenness helps to defend space for particularity in the face of globe-swallowing universal cultures. It also provides reassurance of God's abiding love. The gift of Torah, as the primary expression of chosenness, provides Jews with a path of purpose in the world and a charge to be a source of blessing.
- In Christianity, teachings about sin and salvation ultimately serve to highlight God's continued initiative of love toward humankind and commitment to restoring the wholeness of Creation. Teachings of election can invite Christians to a meaningful life directed toward emulating Christ's goodness.
- In Islam, a sense of belonging to the transnational ummah can help bridge racial and ethnic divides, discovering a sense of unity across difference. The idea of primordial religion imagines that God continually sends guides to humanity, and it acknowledges that others have also been "rightly-guided." Shariah, as the fullness of divine instruction

that provides a path for the faithful, is not identical with human constructions of religious law and practice; it can diffuse claims to hold God's truth in one's hand.

For discussion:

1. How can you distill positive aspects of chosenness and election, and ward against the dangers?
2. What scripture, teachings, art, etc. could help represent these positive aspects?

Suggested Exercise:

Compare the statues of *Ecclesia* (the Church) and *Synagoga* (the Synagogue) from the Strasbourg Cathedral. What do you notice? How do the depictions relate to Christian claims of election and supersession?



Photo credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Ecclesia_and_Synagoga_of_Strasbourg_Cathedral

In Chapter 11, Mikva provides examples in which election and chosenness continue to justify conquest (spiritual and physical) and negative evaluation of difference today. She also provides examples of counter-voices that challenge these dangerous manifestations, voices that promote equity, mutual respect, and interreligious cooperation.

For discussion:

1. Are there any interfaith programs in your community that foster understanding and cooperation across various religions traditions? What strategies do they use?

The idea of chosenness often manifests in terms of national rather than religious identity, but they derive from similar instincts. Mikva reminds us, *"It is easy to see how election of nation or faith fulfills the fundamental human needs discussed in chapter 1: the will to meaning, pleasure and power, the building blocks of a society, the framework for cultural values. There is a transcendent purpose, a compelling claim on our ultimate concern, institutions that can mediate between thought and action, and an abiding community that transcends our own finitude. Yet national chosenness also comes with a dark side, just as it does in religious forms."*

Both religious and national claims of election *"can justify bellicosity, conceit, and self-absorption, but they can also catalyze ethical aspiration, humility, and self-critique"* (pp. 170-171).

For discussion:

1. What do you think about American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is a chosen nation? What is its potential benefit and what are the embedded dangers?
2. The book identifies ways in which election fulfills fundamental human needs; how might that prompt us to think about the concepts of election or chosenness more self-critically?

Section III Reflection: What tools for self-critical faith stood out to you in Part III?

Part IV: Good and Dangerous

Justice

Mikva states, “reward and punishment is fundamental to how we learn” (p. 180), but as a religious idea it is also dangerous. Some people infer God’s punishing judgment through natural disasters, illness, abuse, and tragic loss. Some interpret divine favor in their material or social success. As we learned with chosenness and election, this constitution of the self as “blessed” also creates an “other” who is lacking and therefore must not be blessed.

For discussion:

1. How have themes of reward and punishment factored into your own thinking and experience?
2. What value do they have, and what problems do you see?

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all depict multiple strategies for effecting justice, not only retributive justice (emphasis on punishment after a violation) that so dominates people's imaginations. Other prominent forms of justice include

- restorative justice (repair after a violation),
- procedural justice (equality in process and decision-making), and
- distributive justice (equitable distribution of resources).

Further descriptions can be found on pp. 182-183.

Mikva says, “...[I]t is a valuable exercise to recover the broad range of religious teachings on justice in this age of mass incarceration, police violence, dehumanization, expanding wealth disparity, and other social inequities. The traditions do not furnish us with a ready-made set of policies. Instead, they point to a particular direction, one that in some ways is more holistic and humane than our modern system. The multifaceted, integrated approach to justice in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam presents fertile soil for cultivating anew our own moral and political understandings” (p. 191).

For discussion:

1. Which types of justice have you learned or experienced from your religious community? How were they conveyed?
2. If some of them are "missing," why do you think that is?
3. How might the traditions' broader concept of justice reshape our thinking about public policies about criminal justice, social safety net, etc.? What voice can/should religious teachings have?

Religion in the Public Square

“President Obama (then a senator) declared, ‘When we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, rather than in the positive sense of what it tells us

about our obligations toward one another . . . others will fill the vacuum, those with the most insular views of faith, or those who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends.” (p. 176).

For discussion:

1. In your conversations about religion, how often do you find yourself focusing on the “negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced,” and how often on the “positive sense of what it tells us about our obligations toward one another”?
2. How would you describe the role of religion in the public square?

Mikva advocates “a ‘conversation’ model in public discourse rather than one of strict separation—a conversation in which religious ideas are critically engaged.” Drawing on Robert Audi’s approach she argues that, when people want to bring their religious commitments into conversation about public morality or policy, they have an obligation to balance “*what their religion teaches with a broader understanding of the public good.*” This effort can teach us to stand outside our tradition to see its impact from the perspective of people who believe differently (p. 178).

For discussion:

1. What do you think are the merits and potential dangers of this approach?
2. To what extent can you find this equilibrium between your religious convictions and the broader public good?
3. Think of a contested policy issue today that has religious dimensions. How might this approach shape the conversation?

One obvious danger of critically engaging religious ideas is that critique is not always done constructively. “*Pointing out the critical distinction between condemn and contemn, Cathleen Kaveny urged a public discourse that is not afraid to express strong disapproval, without characterizing opponents as despicable. It can be perplexing to determine how to respond when we encounter a dangerous religious idea in real time.... Commenting on a prayer guide published by Southern Baptists that described Hindus as lost in total darkness, [Diana Eck] wrote:*

As a scholar of Hinduism, I must say you have seriously misrepresented the Hindu tradition...and I would be happy to speak with you about where I think your portrayal is misleading. As an American and fellow citizen, however, I will defend your right to believe and practice Christianity as you do, to believe the worst about our Hindu neighbors, and to believe they are all going to hell, and to say so, both privately and publicly. But as a Christian, let me challenge you here, for I believe that your views of our neighbors are not well grounded in the Gospel of Christ, as I understand it. (p. 197)

For discussion:

1. Do you feel that religious ideas “get a pass”? What is the impact?
2. How possible is it to constructively critique religious ideas in the public square?
3. Can you think of other examples in which it has been done well?

Suggested Exercise: (approximately 15 minutes)

1. Pick a public or political argument made with the support of religious ideas that you consider problematic. (See pp. 88-90 for an example.)
2. Construct a critical response that avoids belittling and sharpens the discourse. You may choose to refer to Diana Eck's quote (above) as a guide.
3. After about ten minutes, find a conversation partner and share both your example and response. Offer feedback to one another.

When students encounter the "new atheist" critique of religion, Mikva urges them *"not to deny or disprove the critique, but rather to utilize its strongest arguments to improve the religious project"* (p. 195).

For discussion:

1. Consider the emotional response you might experience to a strong critique of your religious tradition, or a specific religious conviction. Name particular emotions if you can.
2. How have you or your religious community generally responded to critique? What have been the outcomes of those responses?
3. What are some of the strongest arguments you have heard against your religious tradition? How could these be used to "improve the religious project"?

Section IV Reflection: What tools for self-critical faith stood out to you in Part IV?

You may wish to close with this quote and, if studying with a religious community, a blessing:

"Traditionally rooted and radically engaged, the collection of religious voices certainly substantiates the dangers of religious ideas. Yet it also initiates a complementary discourse that brings religious wisdom and insight to enhance public discussion in pursuit of the common good" (p. 199).

May you be rooted in tradition, with all of its danger, shame, and glory
May you radically engage this precious world we inhabit
May wisdom guide you and insight inspire you
As you participate with the Divine to bring goodness into the world