

The Philosophical Ramifications of Biblical Monotheism on Religious Pluralism

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Introduction

Throughout the history of humanity, religion has always been a factor. However, until the advent of Christianity and Islam, the concept of religious exclusivism, and the attendant need to convert others to the “correct” religious belief, was essentially anathema to most cultures. The concepts of monism, pantheism, or the belief that all gods were essentially one god, had been around for some time, but the idea of Biblical monotheism, the idea that not only was there a single god, but also that only one religious belief was “true,” and all others “false,” is a philosophical distinction that has serious ramifications for humanity as a whole. This paper will examine these issues from historical, philosophical, and moral points of view.

Note: For the purposes of this paper, unless otherwise specified or qualified, the term “monotheism” will be used in reference to the idea that there is one god and one “true” religion, and that the deities and religious systems of other religions are “false.” Often, the term “monotheism” is used to refer to belief systems which would more accurately be described as “monist,” “pantheist,” or “universalist,” but the author of this paper finds that such usage is counterproductive and fosters confusion. Also, the word “orthodox” will be used simply as an adjective describing rigid adherence to belief, as opposed to the various “Orthodox” churches in Christianity.

History

In contrast to the commonly-held belief that the ancient Hebrews were the first historically monotheist religious group, the concept actually originated with the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep IV, later renaming himself as “Akhenaton,” approximately 3500 years ago (Kirsch, 2004, p. 22). But Akhenaton did not just invent monotheism. He used the full force and power of his status as absolute ruler to coerce and force his subjects into adopting this religious stance, even though they were thoroughly opposed to the new doctrine (Kirsch, 2004, p. 4). But upon the death of the pharaoh, the Egyptians returned to their original polytheist roots. Egyptologist Jan Assmann and Sigmund Freud have both written extensively regarding theories that Jewish monotheism was born from the failed experiment of the pharaoh, with Freud going so far as to opine that Moses himself was actually an Egyptian priest himself (Freud, p. 16, pp. 31-32).

Yet even in the Old Testament, there are many passages which exhibit the concept of henotheism, which is the worship of one god, while acknowledging that other gods exist (Kirsch, 2004, pp. 29-30). But it is during the period of the Old Testament, from Moses onwards, that the small core of exclusivist monotheists begin to enact wars, murder, terrorism, and all manners of wicked behavior, with the sole purpose being the enforcement of the new doctrine of exclusivity.

As Kirsch notes, the core value of monotheism is not contained in the few passages extolling caring and compassionate behavior. On the contrary, the primary essence of Biblical monotheism is exclusivism. He notes of the authors of the Bible:

They do not define wickedness and sin in terms of moral and ethical conduct. Indeed, they are far more concerned with the purity of religion than with the pursuit of justice. The very worst sin of all, as they see it, is not lust or greed, but rather the offering of worship to gods and goddesses other than the True God. Whenever a biblical author is moved to call something “abominable,” he is using a code word for every ritual and belief other than his own (2004, p. 35).

Throughout the historical record, there is a fairly clear conflict between the concepts of pluralism or universalism, and the concept of exclusivist, Biblical monotheism. While there were certainly battles between the ancient polytheists of the classical world and the Hebrews, the lack of a necessity for conversion or proselytism in Judaism ensured that they eventually came to a kind of “détente,” where groups like the Romans were able to broker a kind of cessation of hostilities between them. Of course, Jewish resistance to the Greeks and Romans had a great deal more to do with the ancient Hebrews not wanting to be subjects to another people than it had to do with religious intolerance, but even then, the

Romans for example, did much to attempt to foster some kind of compromise, such as the attempt to bring the Hebrew god Yahweh into the Roman pantheon (Fox, 1986, p.261). But this kind of olive branch could only be one-sided, as Kirsch states:

Precisely because the monotheist regards the polytheist with such fear and loathing, peaceful coexistence between the two theologies is possible only from the pagan's point of view and never for the true believer in the Only True God (2004, 12).

And here then, is the root of religious intolerance. It's not the simple idea that there is only one god, but rather the idea that there is only one "true" god. Essentially, if one believes in a single deity, then one can adopt a myriad of different ways to deal with the ideas of other religions, ranging from the radical universalist view of accepting all beliefs as valid, exemplified by William James in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, to the exclusivist view of narrowly viewing one's own deity as the only valid deity, and ascribing to all others the motive of "evil" or "falsehood," as in orthodox Christianity or Islam. Sikhs, for example, believe in only one god, but they also believe in a pluralistic world-view, allowing for the concept that other religions are also serving the same deity in different ways. Even though Sikhs have often been known for their martial prowess, there has never been a war to convert others to Sikhism, or a Sikh "inquisition," or any of the other negative characteristics associated with Biblical monotheism.

Indeed, Assman has explored this concept extensively, noting that:

For these religions, and for these religions alone, the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought. Only they know of heretics and pagans, false doctrine, sects, superstition, idolatry, magic, ignorance, unbelief, heresy, and whatever other terms have been coined to designate what they denounce, persecute and proscribe as manifestations of untruth (2009, p. 4).

Philosophy

So if the core of this intolerance is not simply belief in a single god, is it then possible that a more philosophical component drives this kind of violent and coercive behavior on the part of Biblical monotheists? To continue to use the comparison between Sikhs and Biblical monotheists, there are two major issues that come to the fore. One is the belief in reincarnation, which could be viewed as having a "calming" effect on the need for proselytism. Religious groups that believe in reincarnation generally adopt a more "laissez-faire" attitude to conversion, owing to the idea that one will have many chances to "get it right," as opposed to the time-critical necessity of conversion inherent in groups like Christianity and Islam, where they believe that failure to adopt the "correct" religion prior to death will result in eternal, supernatural torment.

The other issue is the conflict between "inner" and "outer" spirituality. Eastern religions, like Sikhism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, are primarily concerned with the inner spiritual journey of the person, whereas much of Christianity and Islam is concerned with outward actions. This is, of course, a bit of a simplification, but it does explain the difference between the spiritual goals of the average Sikh, Buddhist, or Hindu, as opposed to the missionary zeal of the Christian or Muslim. Generally, the Eastern philosophy is centered around the idea that one must seek enlightenment of their own volition, whereas the Biblical monotheist philosophy is often centered around spreading the "good news" and attracting new converts. Of course, there are many exceptions to this theory, such as the monastic orders of Christianity, and the Hindu "missionaries" of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, otherwise known as the "Hare Krishnas."

However, the missionary activity of non-monotheist religions has never reached into the realm of coercion or warfare, in the way that it has for Biblical monotheist faiths. The 20th century Hindu writer, Sita Ram Goel, discussed the idea of monotheism as an inherently coercive force in his book, *How I Became a Hindu*:

I had an occasion to read the typescript of a book [Ram Swarup] had finished writing in 1973. It was a profound study of Monotheism, the central dogma of both Islam and Christianity, as well as a powerful presentation of what the monotheists denounce as Hindu Polytheism. I had never read anything like it.

It was a revelation to me that Monotheism was not a religious concept but an imperialist idea. I must confess that I myself had been inclined towards Monotheism till this time. I had never thought that a multiplicity of Gods was the natural and spontaneous expression of an evolved consciousness (1993, p. 92).

Morality

Furthermore, the moral absolution of orthodox Biblical monotheism in regards to faith is one extreme obstacle to religious tolerance. For example, if one truly believes that he/she is acting on the will of God or Allah, and that conversion, by any means necessary, is the only way to save humanity as a whole, then one is unlikely to make any kinds of concessions or compromises with people of other faiths, regardless of how reasonable they may seem to the non-zealot.

Indeed, this abhorrence of compromise is a long-standing tradition, celebrated in the Bible, and extending from antiquity to the present. One incident from the distant past that stands out is the plea for tolerance and pluralism in the letter from the Roman senator, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, to the Christian emperor, Valentinian II, in 384 CE, as the persecutions against the polytheists were in full swing:

And so we ask for peace for the gods of our fathers, for the gods of our native land. It is reasonable that whatever each of us worships is really to be considered one and the same. We gaze up at the same stars, the sky covers us all, the same universe compasses us. What does it matter what practical systems we adopt in our search for the truth. Not by one avenue only can we arrive at so tremendous a secret (384, p. 41)

To most non-exclusivists, that passage would evoke extreme sympathy. But to the orthodox Biblical monotheist, like Valentinian II, there is no moral quandary in denying these pleas for civility and tolerance. Their *weltanschauung* is well-defined by these words of the bishop Fulgentius, written approximately a century later:

Of this you can be certain and convinced beyond all doubt, not only all pagans, but also all Jews, all heretics and schismatics will go into the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels (Quoted in Clendenin, 1995, p. 71).

How can one truly expect a person who fully believes the above passage to seriously entertain any kind of pluralist or tolerant society? For that matter, how can one argue for tolerance and pluralism with one who believes that blowing up one's self and killing innocent people will be heartily rewarded by Allah in the afterlife? Both of these kinds of world-views originate with the same kind of orthodox monotheism, even if neither can recognize the same kind of fanaticism in the other. The Christian terrorist who blows up an abortion clinic does not see a kinship with the Islamic terrorist who blows up a liberal mosque, but their ideology and morality stems from the same root, and many times even from the same Old Testament passages.

So what then is the solution? Is Biblical monotheism forever doomed to be the source of all religious intolerance? As noted before, the Sikhs have shown that the belief in a single god does not necessarily require hatred for all faiths that do not embrace one's chosen deity and form of worship.

Perhaps the only way the Biblical monotheism can be "reformed" into a religion that respects the human rights of all people will be through example. Certainly, it cannot be done through brute force, which would be counterproductive, to say the least. For example, many Christians in the West have become inspired by the Hindu saint known as Mahatma Gandhi. One of the greatest symbols of Christian tolerance and morality in the 20th century, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., based much of his political philosophy upon the example of Gandhi. And yet Gandhi himself has spoken extensively regarding the problem of aggressive monotheism, saying:

It is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world's progress toward peace. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity? Why should he not be satisfied if the Hindu is a good or godly man? (1991, p. 87)

Indeed, when Gandhi pointed out his belief that such doctrines presented such a great danger to humanity as a whole, one might think that this would have been noticed more by the Christians that he criticized, but unfortunately, this statement was not immortalized on t-shirts and bumper stickers in much the same manner as many of his other, “safer,” statements.

But that is one of the central paradoxes of modern Christian thought. On one hand, Jesus is heralded as a figure of great love and selfless humanitarianism, while on the other, he is used as a bludgeon to smash upon the “infidels” and establish rigid adherence to a whole host of religious, political, and moral absolutes. Of course, this type of thinking is certainly not limited to Christians, as can be easily seen by comparing the more pluralist world-views of Sufi Muslims to that of the Taliban or Wahhabi-influenced sects of Islam.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not the belief in one god that is the source of religious intolerance, but rather the belief that there is only one “true” god, and that all other religions or forms of worship are “false,” combined with the perceived necessity for proselytism. Proselytism itself, and the seeking of converts, is in fact a destructive action which undermines tradition and culture, and destroys families. It starts from the position that the person to be converted is inherently “wrong,” and seeks to replace his/her belief system with the “correct” one. As the great Hindu saint, Swami Vivekananda said at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893:

If we Hindus dig out all the dirt from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and throw it in your faces, it will be but a speck compared to what your missionaries have done to our religion and culture (Quoted in Gautier, 2000, p. 61).

But monotheism alone, even the belief that there is only “one” god, is not simply enough to create intolerance. The Sikhs and modern Jews are proof of this point. Nor even is proselytism itself, without being accompanied by a belief in “true” and “false” religion, as is shown by the example of the Hare Krishnas. It is only the combination of these two concepts that create religious terrorism, holy wars, jihad, theocracy, and religious hatred. If Christianity and Islam are to survive the next thousand years, they will need to mature into philosophies that can learn to live with their neighbors, without forcing them to change their beliefs, cultures and traditions. The Jews learned this approximately two thousand years ago, and it's high time that the other “religions of the book” follow their example.

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