

THREE "Great" Monotheisms? I Think Not

Friday, August 22, 2008 at 06:16PM

Queen1 in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Western Civilization, monotheism

I am just delving into Andy McCarthy's book *Willful Blindness*, but already his scholarship confirms what those of us unpersuaded by pro-Muslim, Western intellectual apologists perceive about Islam. Islam is not one of the world's great faith traditions, sibling to Judaism and Christianity in its monotheism and its celebration of the unique relationship between God and His creation—most especially that between God and man. Islam is, in fact, the antithesis of Judaism and Christianity, the latter two sharing so much more than merely a belief in one God.

Torah means "law;" gospel comes from koine Greek for "good news." Both are nouns that lead us back to the Word. Judaism and Christianity focus on the Word of God; the essence of the Creator is His spoken word. Islam means "submission"—a noun, but only in so far as it points to a verb—the act of man's subordination to Allah. The distinction is crucial—(perhaps this is where nuance actually signifies something), for from it arise vastly different and probably irreconcilable definitions of freedom, choice, obedience and human governance.

I am no expert on Judaism; I do know that the tradition of inquiry and debate about the meaning of the law and what it means to be Jewish is alive and well even now, way past the time the governing documents (Torah) were written. Judaism is not at odds with natural law and the discussion of human rights deriving from God. Nor do the laws governing Jewish behavior instruct Jews forcibly to convert others and failing that, to kill them or subjugate them. I would look forward to input from Jewish readers on this subject.

I can speak confidently on Christianity and what the Word of God means. Because Christians believe that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, our freedom is freedom from sin and death. Not that Christians do not err and decay in this world, but our ultimate perfection and eternal life has been assured for us by the righteousness of Christ. This is not the place for an extended apology of Christian salvation. Suffice it to say that Christian liberty can be summed up as Augustine centuries ago: "Love God and do as you please." Not a license to licentiousness (sorry, couldn't resist), but an assurance that acceptance of the grace of God given to us in Christ will lead us to live a life of righteousness. Unique among the major religious traditions, then, Christianity sets forth no formal codification of behavior. No laws to which we must adhere in order to please God and become righteous. And certainly no injunction to coerce others by the sword to accept grace—by definition conversion cannot come by force. Rather, the Christian mission is to spread the news of salvation by

conversation, not conflict.

Without doubt, Christians have behaved more than badly over the centuries (but let's not lose sight of the fact that the Crusades were a response to Muslim aggression—not a Christian invasion de novo.) Those who oppose Christianity quickly throw up the straw dummy of the Inquisition, the Crusades and other atrocities committed by Christians and condoned by Church authorities. (Similarly, Yahweh instructed the Jews of the Old Testament to take up arms against their enemies.) The point is, though, that because of the nature of freedom in the Judeo-Christian faith, humans were allowed to move beyond the bloody mindset of the Old Testament and the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment, the Renaissance, the rise of the middle class and the subsequent split of the Church (beyond the one that had already occurred between the Romans and the Orthodox) were possible because of the way the two faiths view human freedom, free will and the role of the written Word of God and its continuous discussion and interpretation. Jews and Christians have elevated theological argument to an art form, an act of worship in itself.

Beyond that, all that we have seen over the past five centuries—the ascendancy of science, the development of the scientific method, the Industrial Revolution, the rule of law and the idea of natural rights—in short, Western civilization as we live it today exists only because of the flexibility and confidence of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. Flexible because the faiths can adapt to changing circumstance and allow the human mind to explore and invent; confident because both faiths know that their Truth is immutable. While Christians may fume and mutter about ethical dilemmas posed by science and medical technology, and while they may bemoan the sad state of human morality, Christians know that nothing that happens in history ultimately can endanger the Gospel. Humans may stray, but God is what God is. Likewise, a government divorced from the Church threatens neither the faith nor individual salvation. So too, Judaism can allow both secular and religious governance. The concept of the Jewish state is part and parcel of Orthodox Judaism, but the grounding of the faith in a geographical point does not necessitate the annihilation of other states, nor does it demand that non-Jews living within it be deemed inferior to the Jewish citizens thereof.

Islam is the antithesis of all the aforementioned. The freedom of Islam is the “freedom” that comes from submitting completely to precepts set in stone centuries ago. The freedom of Islam does not allow the spirit to flourish and choose; it is a narrow tunnel down which the body must proceed. From the total subjugation of the individual to Islamic law, one may achieve salvation. This complete submission encompasses even demands, the forcible conversion, murder or enslavement of the non-Muslim. At the root of Islam seems to be the terror of the power of the modern to diminish the faith

and thus, to diminish Allah himself. The desire of the human spirit to create (like God Himself), to explore, to question even God Himself is anathema to Islam because the submission represented by Islam cannot comprehend the Word of God that offers free will and animates the human spirit to become like God Himself.

Three “great” monotheisms, but such descriptions obscures the reality: “One of these things is not like the others.” A child’s game when comparing an apple, an orange and a book, but deadly adult reality when we must confront a deadly world view—and when to gloss over differences with careless words about multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance is to invite death itself into our midst.