

MYSTICISM AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

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Religious conflict is in the news. Religion has become a central issue dividing peoples and nations. After more than a century of declining influence of religion upon public policies, religion is once again making itself heard in public debates. Some of the issues in which forceful religious voices have recently made themselves heard are:

1. The bombing by radical Muslims of synagogues in Istanbul
2. The ordination of gay people in the USA
3. The Ten Commandments monument in the Alabama state supreme court building
4. The buildup to the war in Iraq
5. The wearing of the Islamic veil in French public schools
6. Hindu attempts to marginalize Muslims and Christians in India
7. Ongoing attempts to expand the right to proselytization by Christians in India.
8. Bush's push for "faith-based initiatives"
9. Islamist terrorism
10. Evangelical Christian, with their resistance to reasonable gun control, opposition to scientific viewpoints about evolution, adamant support of Iraq II, opposition to social gains for gays and abortion, resistance to reasonable taxation, have mainstreamed their views in the last 27 years.

This list could be expanded almost indefinitely, and you will be able to think of any number of other issues that have been given a religious twist.

What makes these kind of issues so intractable is that one of the criteria in these debates if not easily analyzed: the will of the gods. There is no agreed-upon common definition of the god or of religion. Thus, we have no verification procedure available to us to help us decide which of the many claims made on behalf of the various gods of the religions is correct—if any of them are. All too often it seems that the use of religious language in the public square is little more than an alienated way of asserting oneself and ones tribe.

Perhaps the relationships between the religions will come clear in light of a parable. When a civil war breaks out in a distant country, six missionaries, previously unknown to each other, are taken captive. They are imprisoned in an isolated compound, though they are allowed to associate freely with one another. As religion is a central factor in the war raging in the surrounding countryside, the religious outlook of each of the six captives quickly emerges in their conversations. One of the prisoners is a Mormon bishop who preaches that in these latter days God has restored the ancient revelation contained in the Book of Mormon through his servant Joseph Smith. Another prisoner is a fundamentalist Christian missionary, who believes that apart from explicit, doctrinally correct faith in the bodily risen Lord Jesus Christ there is no salvation given to people under heaven. Still another is a Hindu Vaishnava devotee, who believes that all religions culminate in the worship of the supreme personal God, Krishna. The fourth hostage is an Advaita

Vedantist monk, who teaches that through meditation one may realize that the Self and Brahman, or the Absolute, are identical. The fifth prisoner is a Buddhist monk, who has experienced to a profound degree the selflessness of all beings. The last prisoner is a Muslim mulla who believes that there is no God but Allah and the Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets.

Now, this is an odd but plausible situation. It is odd because a group *this* diverse is not what one would find at a conference on religious pluralism sponsored by, say, the World Council of Churches, nor at the World Parliament of Religions. It is plausible because increasingly in communities throughout the world, the mix of religions is at least this rich and often richer.

By being thrown together forcibly, such people, who may generally ignore one another despite being neighbors, are forced to come to terms with each other. Imagine the wariness and curiosity with which these religiously diverse individuals will view each other, once they have adjusted physically and emotionally to their imprisonment. They are all committed and skilled proponents of their respective systems of belief and so it is unlikely that they are going to convert one another.

The guards maintain the externals of their world, leaving the prisoners to themselves to work out how they will live together in their small compound. The shape of self-government is up to them, whether it be despotism or democracy. A democratic situation of mutual religious tolerance naturally develops, since each missionary holds to a distinctive set of nonnegotiable ultimate beliefs. Each rejects the central sacred teachings of the others and none is capable of forcing the others to forsake their respective beliefs and religious practices. Consequently, a regime of religious intolerance enforced by a tyrant or an oligarchy cannot be established, since there is no religious basis for sturdy alliances that could shift the balance of power one way or another.

For instance, the Christian, the Muslim, the Mormon, and the Vaishnava all believe in the ultimate reality of a personal God, over against the Vedantist and Buddhist, who share a nondualist doctrine which allows of no ultimate divisions between orders or kinds of being. So, the Buddhist and the Vedantist, working temporarily as allies, undermine attempts by the theists to establish theism as the doctrine of the compound by exploiting irreconcilable differences among the theists. The Muslim is reminded that orthodox Christians cover up their polytheism with the contradictory doctrine of the Trinity. The Christian is reminded that Muslims reject as shirk, or “association”, the belief that God has a partner, that is, an Incarnate Son. The Muslim and the Christian are disgusted when they are reminded that the Vaishnava celebrates the adventures of a God who makes love to other men’s wives. The Muslim, the Christian, and the Vaishnava are disgusted when they are reminded that the God of the Mormons is made of matter and evolves into the status of deity. Thus, the theist coalition, which threatens to become a tyrannous religious establishment, is successfully broken by the Buddhist and the Vedantist.

Alternatively, an attempt by the Vedantist and the Buddhist to establish a nontheistic contemplative religion as the official religion of the compound is likewise undermined by

the temporarily allied theists who remind the Vedantist that the Buddhist is a nonsubstantialist who argues that nothing has a self-nature. The Buddhist is reminded that the Advaita Vedantist posits a quasi-theistic substance, Brahman, as ultimate. The nontheistic alliance is thus soon broken. In place of such attempts to organize an established religion, religious freedom inevitably develops.

They come to see that even though they cannot find common doctrinal ground, neither can they ignore each other in the hothouse environment of the prison camp. Even though their religious languages are not reducible one to another, they come to see that each of them is engaged, among other things, in a quest to understand the spiritual nature of life and that, even without agreeing with each other or collapsing their doctrines into a false universal, they can and ought to interact with each other as formal equals engaged in a mutual search for adequate responses to the spiritual dimension of life. Rather than making infallible, imperialistic claims about themselves, the religions ought to settle down to the kind of mutual aid as they each pursue this quest. This pluralistic interspirituality is less the dialogue of cagey players thinking about hidden agendas than that of a common quest of wisdom.

This idea of interreligious relationships is more like a group of people from different countries on pilgrimage together. Each pilgrim has laid aside the idea that my religion is the unquestionably truest and best way for others as well as for me. This is not relativism, because there is no denial that it is logically possible that from an absolute standpoint one of these religions may be more comprehensive than another. It is the humble recognition that in this life no infallible means has been given to human beings to establish conclusively the supremacy of any one of the many religious ways available to us. Rather than trying to make converts or prove the supremacy of one religion over the others, it is true to the actual limitations of human knowledge as displayed in this parable that we see followers of other religions as fellow pilgrims with whom we can share our tips about the journey and pick up theirs as we travel on together.

This is a modest view of interreligious relations, but it is workable, reasonable, and spiritual. For it requires the checking of religious egos and hubris—which is an essential ascetical practice in the quest for spiritual maturity.

While this view is not itself mystical, it is implied by mysticism. The clash of religions must lead to the recognition of their formal equality and the surrendering of quests to make any one of them formally or legally superior to the others. It is logically possible that one of them or some set of them is true and the others are false, but we lack a verification procedure for determining that. This is a conclusion derived from logical analysis of the problem of interreligious relations, as well as from practical observation of religious behavior over many millennia now, for there is a tendency for religious movements to self-absolutize, to use the arts and sciences to create a totalistic justification for the picture of reality that each religion creates. While this is an understandable phenomenon—think of how skilled each of us is in constructing plausible rationales for anything that we do—it is no more the case that all of the rationales for the various religions can be true than that all of our splendid rationalizations are true.

Mysticism is only in the popular imagination an indefinite emotionalism with a vaguely religious content. This caricature of mysticism relates to other phenomena such as near-death experiences, paranormal phenomena, drug-induced altered states, and orgasms. Within many religious traditions, mysticism is a less odd mental state than the awareness of liberation that arises when the finite is dissolved by the infinite—an event that is occasioned by a particular way of thinking that, in Christian theology, is called apophatic, or negative, theology. Negative theology is a strategy of undercutting accepted ideas and language about God by using inappropriate or unexpected ideas and expressions.

Totally apophatic in intent and effect is the Buddhist tradition is the familiar Zen saying, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Less well known to Westerners are the underground apophatic traditions of the closer-to-home religions of Abraham. Thus, we have the German Catholic mystical theologian Meister Eckhart praying to God that we may be free of God and delighting that our last and highest farewell as humans is the farewell that we must make from God.

For those more accustomed to the precise and unyielding dogmatism of much traditional Christian thought, the sentiments of Eckhart have the ring of heresy—and Eckhart was convicted of that after his death.

Applying the apophatic method to interreligious relationships, we can lay down a principle that should guide all genuinely pluralistic interreligious relationships: no theology can truly be pluralistic if it is not apophatic, and no genuinely apophatic theology can fail to be pluralistic.

Applying this apophatic and pluralistic principle to Christian theology—one of the local religions, I would say that the time has come to negate the belief that Jesus Christ is essential to human spiritual development.

At its simplest, what I am saying is that Christians ought to remove Jesus from the center of the religious life of humanity. I am not saying that Christians ought to remove Jesus from the center of the Christian life, nor am I saying that Christians ought to stop thinking that Jesus is of the utmost importance for Christians. What I am saying is that Christians have an ethical and theological obligation to refrain from claiming or implying that people who worship at other altars worship false or lesser divinities. This moral and theological criticism is directed not only at the obvious case of the many conservative Christians who think that Jesus is the only way and that those without explicit faith in Christ are destined for eternal damnation. It is also directed at moderate Christians who tolerate and even appreciate other religions while never doubting that Jesus is the hope of the world.

This call to deparicularize Christianity will be disturbing to particularistic Christians who have raised their beliefs and practices into universal truths that are asserted as valid and binding for all human beings. Disturbing as this call may be for some Christians, it is a necessary step that Christianity must take if it wants to live up to its own deepest truth

and the demands of justice. Alongside these theological and ethical reasons for departicularizing itself, Christians should also consider that departicularization is inevitable in any case, since it is an unavoidable result of the ongoing movement of time and history and emphasizes what is true about religions when seen as products of human culture. Against the background of hundreds of thousands of years of prerecorded and recorded human history, to claim that any particular religion is the final religion and essential to the spiritual life of humanity is like saying that one particular society is the final society and essential to the social life of humanity. As influential as Rome was, and as important as the United States may be to many of us today, neither is final nor essential to human well-being. If human life continues for another 100,000 years or more, will any significant trace of either of these societies remain? One can only wonder at what the successor religions to today's religions will look like a hundred millennia from now—if humans survive that long. Will any significant trace of today's religions persist in those future religions?

Viewed against such a broad vista, departicularization can be seen as Christianity's future, whether it creatively embraces it for theological and ethical reasons or whether the passage of time forcibly departicularizes it. At this point in its own journey, then, Christianity must decide whether it will remain particularistic or will embrace pluralism. The Christianity of the future will, I believe, thrive to the degree that it chooses pluralism, and, obeying Jesus' apophatic and kenotic command, to take up the cross and die to self, renounces particularism. Out of this death, there will emerge a new, interspiritual Christianity that no longer relies upon the fiction of its supremacy over other religions. That will be a Christianity worth seeing.