

The Children of Abraham

The People of God

Sunday, March 18, 2007
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.
Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

Primary References

- **Three Faiths, One God: The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam**, Jacob Neusner, Bruce Chilton, William Graham. Brill Academic Publishers, 2002
- **The Monotheists. Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition, Volume 1. The Peoples of God.** FE Peters, Princeton University Press, 2003. ISBN-10: 0-691-0-691-123721
- **Christian Theology. An Introduction. Third Edition.** Alister E. McGrath, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

For Peace, Book of Common Prayer, p. 255

The People of God: Judaism

Judaism

The Chosen People

- Midrash Rabbah, Exodus, 2, 5:
 - God went around to different nations, asking them “Will you accept my Torah?”
 - Well, we’re interested, what’s in it?
 - God replied, “You may not murder, steal ...”
 - “No, we can’t take it; ...”
 - So God went to the next people and asked them. Same rejection.
 - Finally God went to the Israelites.
 - “We will do and we will hear (accept and obey)”
 - Thus the Israelites were “self-chosen” by their respond to God’s offer

Judaism

The Chosen People

- Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a:
 - God approached the Jewish people about giving them the Torah. He overturned a mountain and suspended it above them
 - “If you accept the Torah, fine. If not, this mountain will drop on you and bury you and that’s the end.”

Judaism

The Chosen People

- *am sigulah*: Hebrew for “chosen people”
- The blessing recited by a person when they go up during a service to read the Torah:
 - “Praise be Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the world, who has chosen us from among all peoples and given us the Torah.”
- The Jews view themselves as the *instrument* through which the Torah was given to humankind
- It does not make them “better” than other peoples

Judaism

The People Who Struggle with God

- Jacob wrestles with God one night until God gave him God's blessing:
“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28 NRSV)
- Jacob's (= **Israel's**) descendants were called Hebrews or Israelites
 - **Israelites**: the people of God who struggle with God

Judaism

Ethnic Religion, or Universal?

- How does one become a member of the people of Israel?
- Judaism has been described as an “ethnic” religion because one is born into the people of Israel if your mother is Jewish.
- And unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism is not a “missionary religion” and does not seek converts – for salvation is available to non-Jews as well as Jews

Judaism

Ethnic Religion, or Universal?

- However, anyone may convert to Judaism, accepting the “yoke of Heaven” and the “yoke of the Torah”. In this sense, Judaism is “universal”
- Conversion requires:
 - a profession of faith
 - baptism for women and men
 - circumcision in the covenant of Abraham for men

Judaism

Ethnic Religion, or Universal?

- A gentile who accepts Torah becomes an Israelite. He or she is transformed, becoming a new creation:
 - he or she takes up a position at Mount Sinai with all other Israelites through the ages
 - their children are Israelite without qualification
 - the gentile's genealogy becomes part of the story that the Torah tells

Judaism

Metaphor of Israel as Family

- Israelites are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob (Israel) and Leah and Rachel
 - includes a sense of social contract. Israel is an extended family, with obligations of family
 - includes a sense of Israel as a nation-people, with a right to the family inheritance of the Land of Israel

Judaism

Inheritance of the Land of Israel

- The natural state for Jews is to be in the promised land, the **Land of Israel**
- To be away from that land is the unnatural state of *galut* or exile
 - Throughout history, Jews have often considered exile as punishment for their sins against God

Judaism

Inheritance of the Land of Israel

- The Jews have spent most of their history trying to maintain their identity and integrity as a people under the political sovereignty of others
 - The Kingdom of Israel survived politically for only a few centuries before it was overrun in 721 BC by regional powers
 - 165 to 63 BC: Jews again free after the Maccabees or Hasmoneans defeated the Syrian Seleucid Greeks.
 - The Hasmoneans assumed kingship although they were not of the House of David
 - They also assumed the priesthood, which belonged to the descendants of Aaron (which they were not)
 - Became corrupt
 - 1948 AD: the secular state of Israel established

The People of God: Christianity

Christianity

What is Israel?

- Early Christian community struggled with question: “Who can be Israel? Who can be part of the people of God?”
- Strictest view: Circle of James
 - James, brother of Jesus, head of the church in Jerusalem (killed in the temple in 62 AD)
 - community continued to worship at the temple
 - all laws of Moses must be obeyed; Gentiles cannot be part of Israel

Christianity

What is Israel?

- Paul: the new Israel is the Body of Christ
- The new Israel are those:
 - who receive the Spirit of God (the Holy Spirit) in Baptism
 - who share in the body of Christ through the Eucharist

Christianity

The Body of Christ

- The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not fellowship in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not fellowship in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we are one body, although we are many, because we all share from the one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16-17 NRSV)

Christianity

The Body of Christ

- For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body (being many) are one body, so is Christ. For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greek, slave or free – and we all were given to drink of one spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13 NRSV)

Christianity

Ekklesia

- Christians call their community the “church,” Greek *ekklesia*, those “called out” from their surroundings
- The “church” or *ekklesia* is the assembly of people summoned for a purpose. Word *ekklesia* was used for:
 - congregation of Israelites whom Moses led out to the wilderness (Acts 7:38)
 - congregation of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem subject to persecution (Acts 8:1)
 - most common designation in the New Testament for early Christian communities (114 times)

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church

- In the Apostles Creed, which early in Christianity was a profession of faith at Baptism, we say: “I believe in the holy catholic church”
- In the Nicene Creed, we expand this to “We believe in:
 - one,
 - holy,
 - catholic, and
 - Apostolicchurch”
- These are called the four **“notes”** or **“marks” of the Church**

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: One

- Cyprian of Carthage 251 AD: the church is the “seamless robe of Christ” which should not be divided
- How can we today speak of “**one**” church, when it is so divided institutionally?

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: One

- Approaches to saying we are “one” church:
 - 1. “*Imperialist*” approach: there is only one true church; rest are fraudulent or imperfect
 - 2. “*Platonic*” approach: there is an empirical, historical church (which is divided) and an “ideal church” (which is unified)
 - 3. “*Eschatological*” approach: disunity will be abolished on the last day
 - 4. *Biological* approach: church development like the branches of a tree. Like a tree, still retains an organic unity
 - 5. *Theological* approach: our unity is the belief in the saving work of Christ. Diversity results in adapting this message to the world’s diversity

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: One

- Theological Approach: a unity of basic belief, a diversity in adopting the message for the world:
 - “The gospel in Anglicanism is, then, one facet in a vast mosaic. In its essentials, it corresponds to the gospel as it has been proclaimed and believed all over the world. Yet it is also characterized by its particularity as an experience of God’s saving work in particular cultures, and is shaped by the insights and limitations of persons who were themselves seeking to live the gospel within a particular context.”

- Louis Weil

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: One

- Theological Approach: a unity of basic belief, a diversity in adopting the message for the world:
 - “The unity of the church is a spiritual unity. It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages and makes them into one people of God. It is one and the same Christ who through his word and Spirit unites all together in the same bond of fellowship of the same body of Christ. . . the Church is one, and therefore should be one”

- Hans Küng

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: Holy

- History has clearly documented the sinfulness of the church and its members
- How is the church then “**holy**”? Approaches:
 - 1. “*imperialist approach*:” Church must exclude unholy members
 - 2. Church is “holy,” but its members are sinful
 - But what is the meaning of church disembodied of its members?
 - 3. “*eschatological approach*:” church is as sinful as its members, but will be purified on the last day

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: Holy

- 3. “*eschatological approach*:” church will be holy in the end:
 - Augustine (354 – 430 AD): “Whenever I have described the church as being without spot or wrinkle, I have not intended to imply that it was like this already, but that it should prepare itself to be like this, at the time when it too will appear in glory”
 - Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274 AD): “That the church will be. . . without spot or wrinkle. . . will only be true in our eternal home, not on the way there. We would deceive ourselves if we were to say that we have no sin, as 1 John 1:8 reminds us.”

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: Holy

- 4. **Holy** as being “set apart for God”
 - This is the Old Testament idea of holiness: something or someone set aside for God. People are holy when they are:
 - dedicated to God
 - distinguished from the world on the basis of their calling
 - The church is holy in the sense that it is “set apart” for God, although *not* holy in the sense it is sinless = “morally” holy

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: Catholic

■ Catholic

- Greek phrase *kath' holou* (“referring to the whole”)
- Latin word *catholicus* (“universal or general”)

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: Catholic

- Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 AD): church is catholic = universal and general:
 - *geographically*: it encompasses the whole world
 - *anthropologically*: it is for all people. No one is rejected, whether master or slave, male or female
 - *chronologically*: the church will last to the end of time

Christianity

“Notes” or “Marks” of the Church: Apostolic

- **“Apostolic:”** originating with the apostles, or having a direct link to the apostles
- Three aspects of the “apostolic” (H. B. Swete, Cambridge Regius Professor of Divinity, 1890-1915):
 - 1. planted in the world by the apostles
 - 2. adheres to the teaching of the apostles
 - 3. carries on the succession of apostolic ministry
 - Bishops, the successors of the apostles, pass on their spiritual charisma or power of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands in the consecration of new bishops and priests

Christianity

Church and State

- Modern ideas of the separation of church and state did not begin until the rise of European nation-states in the 16th century
- In general (with notable exceptions), Christianity had no problems with a separate hierarchy for political leadership and religious leadership
 - Jesus (John 18:36): “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (NRSV)

Christianity

Church and State

- Christianity developed for three centuries without any relationship with the state, until Roman Emperor **Constantine** embraced Christianity in 324 AD
- 390 AD: the first major clash between the imperial hierarchy and the church hierarchy
 - involved Emperor **Theodosius I** (347 to 395 AD) and **Ambrose, Bishop of Milan** (340 to 397 AD)
 - Theodosius I: first Roman Emperor who ruled as a baptized Christian
 - Theodosius I, to punish an insurrection in Salonika, slaughtered 7000 men, women and children after inviting them to an amphitheater for a “special performance”
 - Ambrose excommunicated the Emperor and forced him to perform public confession and penance

The People of God: Islam

Islam

The Natural Disposition to Islam

- God created human beings to serve God by their *active choice*
- One must *choose* to be a Muslim
 - As in Christianity, parents may serve as a “proxy” for a young child and declare they are Muslim, until the child can make a decision of their own

Islam

The Natural Disposition to Islam

- Human beings are *naturally disposed* at birth to *islam*, to true submission to the will of God
 - *fitrah* = “way of being created” or “natural disposition”
 - It is poor upbringing that causes a child to turn to less complete or evil religious practices
 - Contrasts with the Christian doctrine of “Original Sin”

Islam

The Umma

- The call of God to *islam* (submission to God) through Muhammad and the Qur'an includes not only a call to personal faith, but also a call to be part of the **community of true believers**, the **Umma**, to be brothers and sisters with others who have submitted to God:
- You are the best community (*umma*) singled out for people: you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God (Qur'an 3:110)

Islam

The Umma

- Be a community (umma) that calls for what is good, urges what is right, and forbids what is wrong; those who do this are the successful ones. Do not be like those who, after they have been given clear revelation, split into factions and fall in to disputes (Qur'an 3:104-105)

Islam

The Umma

- Umma:
 - Based on faith, not blood affiliation
 - Anyone who obeys and worships God alone and who professes the *Shahadah*: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God” is considered a Muslim (one who submits) and a hence a member of the **Umma**
 - First Umma – a human community under God – was founded in Medina between 622-632 AD by the Prophet Muhammad

Islam

The Umma

- In that first Umma in Medina, Muhammad was the:
 - political leader,
 - military commander, as well as
 - religious leader and prophet
- In contrast, Christianity developed for three centuries without any relationship with the state, until Roman Emperor **Constantine** embraced Christianity in 324 AD
 - In Muhammad, Islam had both its “Constantine” and “Jesus” in one person – from the start
 - Muhammad is the model for how to live a good life, a “straight path,” for Muslims

Islam

The Umma: Sunni View

- 632 AD: Muhammad died
- The majority of Muslims (Sunni) believe Muhammad's role as **spiritual and religious leader** for the **Umma** could *not* be passed on.
- His role as **political leader** of the **Umma** however was passed on through the **caliphate**
- The **Caliph** is the absolute temporal ruler charged with administering and defending the **Umma**
 - He possesses no special authority in matters of faith
- Religious scholars, the **ulama** (whose role is akin to Jewish rabbis) help interpret matters of faith

Islam

The Umma: Sunni View

- 632 to 661: under four successive caliphs known as the **“four rightly guided caliphs,”** Islam rapidly expanded far beyond Arabia
- 661 to 750 AD: the Caliph resided in Damascus, capital of the Islamic **Umayyad Empire**
- 750 to 1258 AD: the Caliph generally resided in Baghdad, capital of the Islamic **Abbasid Empire**

Islam

The Umma: Sunni View

- 946 AD: the Abbasid Caliph appointed the first **Sultan**, a Turkish general
 - Officially the **Sultans** were military deputies of the Caliph and derived their political power from the Caliph
 - In reality the **Sultans** were military commanders with the power of the army behind them, and they did what they wanted
 - The **Caliph** became a figurehead, significant symbolically, prayed for during Friday public prayer, but without real political power in the empire

Islam

The Umma: Sunni View

- 1258: **Mongols** sacked Baghdad and conquered the Abbasid empire
- 1258 to 1517: Caliph resided in Cairo, where the **Mamluk Sultan** had successfully repelled the Mongols
- 1517: **Turkish Ottoman Empire** conquered the Mamluks, and claimed the caliphate
 - 1517-1924: Caliph resided in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), capital of the **Turkish Ottoman Empire**
- 1924: the secular state of **Turkey**, formed from part of defeated Ottoman Empire (which had supported Germany & Austria-Hungary in WWI), abolished the caliphate

Islam

The Umma: Sunni View

- Ideally, Muslims feel the **Umma** should be:
 - a single religious and political community
 - ruled through God's law, the **Shari'a**
- Until the end of the Ottoman Empire and caliphate in 1924, Muslims could that imagine an imperfect form of that ideal – a single, undivided theocratic community ruled by the Caliph (the political successor to Muhammad) and his deputies (the Sultans) – had existed since the time of Muhammad
 - For many modern Muslims, something seems to have gone terribly wrong with Islamic history in the past century

Islam

The Umma: Shiite View

- 632 AD: Muhammad died
- A minority of Muslims (today's **Shiites**) believe Muhammad intended his role as:
 - **spiritual and religious leader** *and*
 - **political leader** for the Umma

to be passed on through his family, in particular, his cousin **Ali**

- Muhammad, an orphan, had been brought up by Ali's father
- Ali was married to one of Muhammad's daughters (Fatima)

Islam

The Umma: Shiite View

- Ali was passed over as the rightful leader of the Umma three times, finally ruling as the **religious and political head (Imam)** of the Umma from 656 to 661 AD
- 661 AD: **Imam Ali** murdered, and the Muslim general Mu'awiya, based in Damascus, Syria *illegitimately* seized the leadership and founded the **Umayyad Empire**
 - **Imam Ali** is buried in city of Najaf, in modern day Iraq, site of a great Shiite shrine to him
- Ali's son **Imam Husayn** was killed fighting the Umayyads in Karbala (city in modern day Iraq)
 - Husayn is considered a martyr by Shiites
 - Karbala is a site of great Shiite shrine to **Imam Husayn**

Islam

The Umma: Shiite View

- **Imams**, possessing the light of Muhammad, are sinless and infallible
- The **12th Imam**, bearing the prophet's own name Muhammad, disappeared in the 874 AD and went into a state of hiding/occultation (*ghaybah*) = **The Hidden Imam**
 - He will return one day to establish a perfect age of Islam
 - In the meantime, **Shiite ulama** or religious scholars (often call **mullahs**) exercise a “general representation” of the Hidden Imam as they interpret the Qur'an and establish law for Muslims

Islam

The Umma: Shiite View

- The **Hidden Imam** went into occultation in a cave near city of Samarra (in modern day Iraq)
- Tombs of the 10th and 11th Imams are in the al-Askari shrine (Golden Dome shrine) in Samarra (bombed Feb 22, 2006)

Islam

The Umma: Shiite View

- For Shiites, Muslim history has been dominated by empires ruled by illegitimate leaders and Muslims (Sunni) who not recognize the religious and spiritual leadership of the descendants of Muhammad and Ali (the “people of the house”), the **Imams**
- Shiites, living as an often oppressed minority, have preserved the truth faith of prophet

Islam

The Umma: Summary

- Faith cannot be merely private, but must also be political and social
 - secular societies that tolerate religious pluralism often do so with the assumption that religion is a “private matter,” separate from society and politics
 - keeping religion a “private matter” is unacceptable in true *islam* (submission to God)

Primary References

- **Three Faiths, One God: The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam**, Jacob Neusner, Bruce Chilton, William Graham. Brill Academic Publishers, 2002
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