

The Children of Abraham

The Believers and the Unbelievers

Sunday, April 15, 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
- **Christian Theology. An Introduction. Third Edition**. Alister E. McGrath, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001

**Holy One, holy and eternal,
awesome, exciting and delightful in your
holiness;
make us pure in heart to see you;
make us merciful to receive your
kindness
and to share our love with all your human
family;
then will your name be hallowed on earth
as in heaven.**

The Believers and the Unbelievers

Introduction

Believers and Unbelievers

Introduction

- **Monotheism** (One God, who reveals God's self to the faithful), naturally divides humanity into:
 - those who know the One God and respond to God
 - those who do not (the “idolaters”)
- **Attitudes towards the Idolaters:**
 - **Passive:**
 - Judaism: avoids idolaters, praying that God in the end will bring all to faith
 - **Active:**
 - Islam: believers given the task of bringing idolaters to faith
 - Christianity: “Go forth and teach all nations. . .”

The Believers and the Unbelievers

Judaism

Judaism

The Seventy Nations

- The Gentile nations were known as the “Seventy Nations” (from the Book of Genesis)
 - “the nations” = Hebrew *goyyim*; Greek “Gentiles”
- Jews do not seek out converts, for salvation is considered more difficult for a Jew than a Gentile
 - Talmud: A Gentile wishing to convert to Judaism must be repelled three times
 - Gentiles can achieve salvation by following the **Commandments of Noah**

Judaism

Commandments of the Children of Noah

- 1. Do not worship idols
- 2. Do not commit murder
- 3. Do not commit adultery and incest
- 4. Do not eat a limb torn from a living animal
- 5. Do not blaspheme
- 6. Do not steal
- 7. Live by an adequate system of law and justice

Judaism

A Holy Nation Amid a World of Idolaters

- A Holy Nation Set Apart:
 - **“Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”** Exodus 19:5-6 NRSV)
- Idolatry – rebellious arrogance against God – makes one unclean:
 - **“And he should not pass underneath it, but if he passed underneath it, he is unclean.”** (Abodah Zarah 3:8, Halakhah on idolatry)

Judaism

A Holy Nation Amid a World of Idolaters

- A Holy Nation Set Apart:
 - Israel must be a nation where the One God rules, free of idolatry
 - Although Israelites may exist in a world dominated by gentiles (idolaters), they are free to make choices (for example, in trade and services) that will keep their nation free of the contamination of idolatry

Judaism

A Holy Nation Amid a World of Idolaters

- A Blessing to the Nations:
 - God, speaking to Abraham:
“by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Genesis 22:18 NRSV)
 - Jacob Neusner:
“Israel ... forms the center and heart of humanity, and the gentiles circle in their orbits round about.”

Judaism

A Holy Nation Amid a World of Idolaters

- A Blessing to the Nations: How does Israel (the Jews), a holy nation, a priestly kingdom, serve as a blessing for humanity?
 - God's mercy and sustaining of creation depends on the faithfulness of Jews to the Torah
 - They teach God's law by the example of their living
 - They perform acts of goodness to others. An ethical deed for a gentile is an act of *Kiddush haShem* = "sanctification of the name of God"
 - If free to do so, they extend the social principles of the Torah in the life of the nation in which they live

Judaism

Judaism and the Monotheistic Religions

- Jewish views on Christianity and Islam are mixed. Maimonides (1135-1204):
 - there is a divine design in Christianity and Islam in their:
 - spreading monotheism through the world
 - preparation of the world for the messianic time to come

Judaism

Judaism and the Monotheistic Religions

- Maimonides:

“...it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator, for our ways are not His Ways, nor our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters, relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite [Muhammad], who came after him, only served to clear the way for the King Messiah, to prepare the world for the worship of God with one voice.”

Judaism

Judaism and the Monotheistic Religions

- Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776):
“The founder of Christianity has given the world a twofold blessing: He strengthened the Torah of Moses by emphasizing its eternally binding power; in addition, he brought blessings to the heathen, as he removed idolatry from their midst and imposed upon them the higher moral obligations that are contained in the Torah of Moses.

There are many Christians of the highest qualities and outstanding morality. Would that all Christians lived by their own commandments. They are not obligated, as are the Jews, to fulfill the law of Moses, nor do they commit a sin, if they associate other beings to God as His partner, in worshipping the triune God. They will receive their reward from God for spreading the faith in Him among peoples that never before had even heard of His Name, for He looks into the heart”

Judaism

Judaism and the Monotheistic Religions

- Poem “The Royal Crown” by Solomon ben Judah Ibn Gabirol (11th century) recited on the eve of Yom Kippur:

“You are God! All creatures are Your servants, serving You in worship. Your honor is not diminished through those serving another next to You, for all seek to attain to You.”

Judaism

Judaism and the Monotheistic Religions

- However, Christianity and Islam are in error:
 - The Messiah has *not* yet come
 - Belief in the incarnation and divinity of Jesus is strictly forbidden

Judaism

Judaism and the Monotheistic Religions

- Maimonides (1135-1204):

“Has there ever been a greater stumbling block than this? All the prophets affirmed that the Messiah would redeem Israel, save them, gather their dispersed, and confirm the commandments. But he [Jesus] caused Israel to be destroyed by the sword, their remnant to be dispersed and humiliated. He was instrumental in changing Torah, causing the world to fall into error and serve another besides God.”

Judaism

Judaism and the Other Religions

- Regarding other faiths (such as Hinduism, Buddhism ...) the rabbis in the Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:21 note:

“the righteous of all the nations of the world have a share in the world to come.”

The Believers and the Unbelievers

Islam

Islam

Salvation History

- From the beginning, God has given humanity *clear* signs of His sovereignty over creation:
 - in the wonders and beauty of creation
 - in direct revelations through God's messengers and prophets
 - Abraham: first Muslim, submitting with unconditional faith to the Living God
 - The revelation of the Qur'an, received through Muhammad, was the final, culminating revelation

Islam

Salvation History

- Therefore, unbelief is a perversity, for every community had received God's direct revelations, but then failed as "believers" in not preserving and living by them
 - For example: Jews and Christians had distorted or tampered with the revelations of their messengers
 - *kafirs* = "those who ungratefully reject [God]" Not merely unbelievers, but *willful* unbelievers

Islam

Salvation History

- Qur'an makes a distinction between:
 - 1. the “People of the Book” (*ahl alkitab*)
 - 2. the idolatrous polytheists (*mushrikun*, “those who associate [partners with God]”)
 - For the early Muslim community or Umma, during the time when the Qur'an was still being revealed, these were typically pagan Arab tribes

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- The Qur'an provides mixed messages about the “People of the Book”
- Some passages recognize their piety and faith:
 - **“The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their rewards with their Lord.”** (Qur'an 2:62)

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- Some passages recognize their piety and faith:
 - [Muslim believers should] **“argue only in the best way with the People of the Book, except with those of them who act unjustly. Say, ‘We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God are one [and the same]; we are devoted to Him.’”** (Qur'an 29:46)

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- Some passages suggest certain groups of the “People of the Book” lack true faith:
 - **“Some of the People of the Book would dearly love to lead you [believers] astray, but they only lead themselves astray ...”**
(Qur'an 3:69)
 - **“Those who disbelieve among the People of the Book and the idolaters will have the Fire of Hell, there to remain. They are the worst of creation.”** (Qur'an 98:6)

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- Some passages praise Christians while condemning Jews:
 - **“You [Prophet] are sure to find that the most hostile to the believers are the Jews and those who associate other deities with God; you are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, ‘We are Christians,’ for there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics ...” (Qur'an 5:82)**

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- And some passages criticize all the “People of the Book” who have not recognized Islam as the fulfillment of their faith:
 - **“Say, ‘People of the Book, why do you reject God’s revelations? God witnesses everything you do.’ Say, ‘People of the Book, why do you turn the believers away from God’s path and try to make it crooked, when you yourselves [should be] witnesses to the [truth]? ...’” (Qur’an 3:98-99)**

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- Qur'anic passages have been used to justify:
 - toleration of Jews and Christians, or
 - belligerence towards them
- Tolerance: **“There is no compulsion in religion: ... whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break.”** (Qur'an 2:256)

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- **Belligerence: “The Sword Verses”**
 - **“... wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every outlook post....” (Qur'an 9:5)**
 - **“Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax and agree to submit.” (Qur'an 9:29)**

Islam

Qur'an and the People of the Book

- “Taking all the diverse qur’anic statements about the people of Scripture together, it is impossible to ascertain a single clear ‘line’ regarding their proper treatment at the hands to **Muslims**” (William Graham, in *Three Faiths, One God*)

Islam

Modern Attitudes to People of the Book

- In the modern age, with the experiences of:
 - the Christian Crusades
 - the Ottoman-Christian state rivalries
 - European colonialism

Muslim attitudes to Christian and Jews have tended to be more intolerant or belligerent because of perceived threats

Islam

Early Islam and People of the Book

- In the early Islamic states, there was remarkable tolerance towards Christians and Jews
- **Covenant of Umar:** People of the Book were given “protected status” or *dhimmi*, and could practice their religion within limits. They:
 - could not publicize or proselytize their religion
 - could not built new houses of worship, but could repair existing structures
 - had to wear distinctive clothing
 - had to pay a poll tax *jizya* (in lieu of the *zakat* for Muslims)
 - had to treat Muslims with respect and deference
 - could not bear arms, ride horses, or serve in the military

Islam

Idolatrous Polytheists

- There was no tolerance towards the polytheists (in early Islam, these were typically the pagan Arab tribes)
- The polytheists were enemies of God

Islam

Idolatrous Polytheists

- Polytheists were to be fought wherever they were encountered if they did not convert:
 - Muhammad, quoted in the hadith *al-Bukhari* 56:22:1:
“Paradise lies in the shadows of swords”
 - Muhammad, quoted in the hadith *al-Bukhari* 56:102:5:
“I have been commanded to fight people until they say, “There is no god but God.” And whoever says “there is no god but God,” his life and his property shall be kept inviolate by me, save for his lawful due, and his accounting will be with God.”

Islam

The Natural Predisposition To Islam

- Every person is born *muslim*, submissive to God. There is a natural predisposition (*fitrah*) to the true faith
- Every infant born is born with the *fitrah*; then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian [Zoroastrian] (Sahih 45:22 Hadith)

Islam

The Natural Predisposition To Islam

- Because of this, there is a tendency to see all unbelievers as potentially reclaimable monotheists, so long as they do not ungratefully reject:
 - the clear signs of God in the world around them
 - the clear revelations of God in His final Scripture, the Qur'an
- *da'wah* = “calling” to repentance and true faith

The Believers and the Unbelievers Christianity

Christianity

Christian Approaches to Other Religions

- 1. Particularism
- 2. Inclusivism
- 3. Pluralism

Christianity

Particularism

- “God has revealed the Way and the Truth and the Life in Jesus Christ, and wills this to be known throughout the world” (Hendrik Kraemer, 1888-1965)
- The revelation of Christianity is in a category of its own. It is a unique, and distinctive faith. The “revelations” found in other religions are inauthentic, purely human inventions
- Another term: **exclusivism**

Christianity

Particularism

- Two camps of **Particularists**:
 - 1. There is *no* knowledge of God to be found outside of Christ (Karl Barth, 1886-1968)
 - 2. God's self-revelation *may* occur outside of Christianity, but *can only be interpreted correctly* in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (Hendrik Kraemer, 1888-1965)

Christianity

Particularism

- Criticism of Particularism:
 - Inconsistent with the God's desire to save all human beings.
 - What of those who have not heard the gospel, or choose to reject it?

Christianity

Particularism

- Fulgentius of Ruspe, a disciple of St. Augustine 4th century, wrote:
 - **“The holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside of the Catholic Church – not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics – can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, ‘which was prepared for the devil and his angels,’ unless they are gathered into that Church before the end of life.”**

Christianity

Particularism

- Karl Barth (1886-1968):
 - Knowledge of God and salvation are possible *only* through Christ
 - However, at the end of history, grace will triumph over unbelief, and all will come to faith in Christ
 - The particularity of God's revelation through Christ is thus compatible with belief in universal salvation

Christianity

Inclusivism

- Most significant advocate: Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984). In volume 5 of *Theological Investigations* he makes these points:
 - 1. **“Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all people, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right.”**
 - 2. revelation of God in Christ took place at a specific time in history. Those who lived before, or who have not yet heard of it, would therefore seemed excluded from salvation. But this is incompatible with God’s will to save all.

Christianity

Inclusivism

- Most significant advocate: Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984). In volume 5 of *Theological Investigations* he makes these points:
 - 3. Knowledge of God, and God's saving grace must therefore be available outside Christianity, including other religions, despite their errors and shortcomings
 - 4. Faithful adherents of non-Christians religions should be regarded as “anonymous Christians”
 - 5. Religious pluralism will always be part of human existence

Christianity

Inclusivism

- To summarize Karl Rahner (1904-1984):
 - Christianity and Christ have a unique and exclusive status that other religions do not share. Other religions are not equal to Christianity
 - Nevertheless:
 - knowledge of God and God's self-revelation may be present in other religions
 - the grace of God and even salvation may be present in other religions
 - God's grace might be mediated by the lifestyle other religions evoke, e.g. selfless love

Christianity

Pluralism

- Pluralism: each religion is a distinctive yet *equally* valid understanding of God or ultimate reality
- Most significant advocate: John Hick (b. 1922)
 - *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973)
 - *The Second Christianity* (1983)

Christianity

Pluralism

- John Hick (b. 1922): we must distinguish between:
 - the ultimate spiritual, transcendent reality underlying the various religious systems, and
 - the perceptions of this reality within the various religions (shaped by culture and historical accidents)

Christianity

Pluralism

- John Hick (b. 1922):
 - The same spiritual reality lies at the heart of every religion, yet **“their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration”**
 - Differences should be regarded as **“both-and”** rather than **“either-or”**

Christianity

Pluralism

- Criticism of **Pluralism**:
 - Some differences between the various religions cannot be reconciled in a “both-and” manner. They are clearly contradictory
 - Sets aside a major Christian conviction: that Jesus Christ is a unique revelation of God. This point of view therefore cannot be considered a “Christian” perspective

Christianity

Summary

	The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is unique and reveals most fully the true nature of God	God's self-revelation and grace are present outside of Christianity
Particularism	Yes	No
Inclusivism	Yes	Yes
Pluralism	No	Yes

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
- **Christian Theology. An Introduction. Third Edition**. Alister E. McGrath, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001