

**GOD IS ONE**  
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*This is an expanded version of a sermon I gave Oct. 16, 2011 at the Anglican Parish Church in Cirencester, England, traveling en route to the Holy Land. Much of it is based on James Carroll's book "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (all unattributed quotes are from there, mainly pages 58-64, and 302-302) which introduced me to a deeper understanding of the oneness of God, and on Karen Armstrong's book "Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths." Those were the two books we studied in preparation for our trip to Palestine.*

Something very interesting happened to the Jewish mindset and understanding of God during the Babylonian exile and captivity. At first the Hebrews weren't really monotheists; they didn't necessarily believe that there was only one god. I ran into this term only recently: at first they were actually what we call "monolators"; they worshipped only one god, their god, but they didn't necessarily deny the existence of other gods. But as time went on the Jewish people understood more and more about the character of this god that they worshipped, and their experience of God eventually made them question the very existence of any of other gods, and especially all the tribal deities that surrounded them, the local gods who seemed to be so limited and narrow. The god of Israel--lower case "g"--eventually became for them God--upper case "G." And so when they were in Babylon, the Jews not only refused to worship the local gods, they even refused so much as to acknowledge that these local gods existed at all. In other words, they became monotheists, meaning that they began to believe that not only was this the only God to be worshipped, but that only this God-as-they-understood-God was real. There was only one God. So the psalms say over and over, for example Psalm 115, *The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have eyes but cannot see, hands but cannot feel...*, etc. And of course we see so many allusions to this also in the prophet Isaiah: *I am the Lord and there is no other, there is no God besides me* (Is 45).

It is after that period in their history when editors and redactors really starting compiling the book that Christians call the Old Testament, though of course it is not "old" to a Jew--it is simply the Torah, or the Jewish Bible. These redactors and editors started reading this monotheism back into their own history, and perhaps they even added it in at times as they interpreted the ancient stories that had been passed down to them. It might not be obvious at first, but even if we look at that first story of creation in Genesis there's evidence of this new understanding of God that's different from other religions of the ancient world. Even though the creation story in Genesis has a lot in common with other creation stories of that region, what makes the Jewish story unique is that it shows God not only creating this particular tribe or that particular kingdom; it shows God as the creator of the entire cosmos, God as the origin of all that is. God is One.

But I was interested to learn that the term "monotheism" wasn't actually coined until the seventeenth century, and our understanding of what the oneness of God means is actually very modern. In our scientific age, inadvertently perhaps, we think of "one" as a number, and so God is thought to be some kind of a

solitary entity who stands apart from everything else, standing apart from all other creatures as well as all other gods, and therefore God can be seen as antagonistic to everything else as well. If we understand "oneness" in that way, then God can easily be a source of conflict and competition, our god against all the other gods, as if God had some kind of ego to defend or territory to protect. But we shouldn't understand the Oneness of God mathematically or scientifically or even philosophically. It has to be understood spiritually, meaning not to think of "oneness" as a matter of quantity; God's oneness is a quality. What the Oneness of God is affirming is a unity. God's Oneness does not mean a being who stands apart from creation, God's Oneness does not mean a being who is radically different and superior to creation. It means the being who is present to creation, "as the reconciliation of all oppositions," Carroll says, echoing the theme of the mystic Nicholas of Cusa. God is unity, God is the One who unites, God is oneness itself.

Now if we go back for a moment to the story of Moses' meeting God in the burning bush, we see God who is revealed as "I am who am" or (what is the best translation of the Tetragrammaton?) perhaps, as I've read it translated, "I am who causes to be." God is being itself. God is not just a Being over and against all other beings: God is being itself. *Deus es ens*, says Thomas Aquinas, the very ground of being. (We are, you may note, pretty close to the Indian understanding of *brahman*, not to mention the Rhineland mystics' and Paul Tillich's notion of God as *grunt*.) God isn't just associated with Israel nor with any other particular clan or tribe; God is related to all that is. The Oneness of God isn't a number: it's a quality. Even more, it's a relationship, a relationship with all that exists.

And this revelation that God is one also means, again as the prophet Isaiah especially saw, that the God of this people, Israel, is actually the God of all people. God is not the god "of the tribe but of the cosmos--of all creation." So if God is jealous, God is jealous of everyone's love, "and offers himself, through the... promise made to Abraham, not to a single people, but to 'a multitude of nations.'" And of course Jerusalem, and Mount Zion with it, becomes the symbol for this, again as we see often in Isaiah: *In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised above the hills and every nation shall come streaming, many peoples come and say, 'Let us climb the mountain to the house of God...'* (Is 2) And so in Isaiah 45, in what may have seemed like a shock to the people of Israel, the prophet Isaiah calls Cyrus, the king of Persians, God's anointed one!--"though you know me not." And it is Cyrus who is mandated to rebuild the Temple in the ruins of the ancient city. God is one! The God of all people, "though they know me not!" I was reminded too of Paul in the Areopagus as reported in the Acts of the Apostles, claiming at the shrine to the unknown of god, that this is the God revealed by Jesus. In his letter to the Romans too, Paul develops an argument about the oneness of God based on the *Shema*, arguing that God is the god of Israel specifically yet not *only* the God of Israel, "because if God is God alone (one), then there is no other god for the other nations... Israel's God is God of both Israel and the members of other nations who turn to the one God." (The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 260)

And Jews would normally pray facing Jerusalem since Jerusalem was the very

center of their world. But Pagola says it is significant that Jesus would pray "looking up to heaven," which was also an ancient custom of the psalms, instead of toward Jerusalem. This is because Jesus wasn't tied to one specific place. (He also told the Samaritan woman in John 4, "You worship on this mountain, we worship in Jerusalem. But God is Spirit and those who worship in spirit and truth...") For Jesus, God was the "father in heaven," who "did not belong to a specific race or people, who was not the property of any religion. God belonged to everyone." God is one. (Pagola, 64)

So after the Babylonian exile, Israel starts to perceive God in a whole new way, a way in which competition from or comparison to other deities was simply inconceivable. This belief in God is not merely in opposition to other gods; it's totally different from the belief in other gods; it's an entirely different way of knowing. James Carrol has the beautiful phrase: "God is present in this world as meaning is present in knowledge." To affirm the Oneness of God is to affirm a God who is closer to us, as St Augustine wrote, than we are to ourselves, or as it is written in the Qur'an, "closer than our jugular vein." We might say God is closer to us than our own awareness is, or as the very ground of our awareness, "as meaning is present in knowledge." That's the Oneness that counts, and monotheism is identifying the awareness of this God with the very ground of awareness. (We are now awfully close to the Indian notion of Atman-ground of consciousness.) It's a "magnificent breakthrough in the religious imagination," Carroll says, and it's the core of the religious vision of the Bible. God is One.

In this day and age I look for any occasion when I can refer to Judaism, Christianity and Islam together, the three religions that stem from Abraham, the Abrahamic faiths. Sometimes we also refer to the three of them as the prophetic traditions, those that believe that God intervenes in human history, as compared to the mystical traditions of the Far East, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, for instance, that are much more focused on the interior. (This is not to say that each aspect isn't present, perhaps in a quieter and more hidden way, in the other.) All three of these Abrahamic faiths are based on this oneness of God. So the *Shema*, the most famous of all Jewish prayers, that still defines Israel to this day, from Deuteronomy (6:4-9): *Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*--"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."<sup>1</sup> This is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance to one God, the first prayer a Jewish child is taught and the last words a Jew says prior to death--an affirmation of God's Oneness. James Carroll suggests that it may be that Jesus' embodiment of God's Oneness, his sense of intimacy with the Father, saying things like "The Father and I are one," is the very reason that his followers thought that he was divine. And so the Christian

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<sup>1</sup> *Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. V'ahav'ta eit Adonai Eloheikha b'khol l'vav'kha uv'khol naf'sh'kha uv'khol m'odekha. V'shinan'tam l'vanekha v'dibar'ta bam Uk'shar'tam l'ot al yadekha v'hayu l'totafot bein einekha. Ukh'tav'tam al m'zuzot beitekha uvish'arekha.* ["Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)]

creed which begins with, *Credo in unum Deo*--"I believe in one God...". And so the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), influenced by Jews and Christians, clears the *kabah* in Mecca of all the other deities and declares what is known in Islam as the *shahada*--*la illa ha illaha*--"There is no god but God..." Some suggest that it is this sense of and feeling for the Oneness of God that sparked the rapid spread of Islam. Certainly Muhammad himself thought he was merely recovering the ancient faith of Abraham, not founding a new religion. The great ideal of the Qur'an was *tawhid*, which literally means "making one." So, as Karen Armstrong explains it, individual Muslims were called "to order their lives so as to make God their chief priority: [and] when they had achieved this personal integration, they would experience within that unity which was God." Ah, what does that mean? "To experience *within* the unity that is God"? But not only individuals, the whole human society "also had to achieve this unity and balance and all its activities under the aegis of the sacred." (Armstrong, 220) And so, as well, holiness "was thus seen as inclusive rather than exclusive." And since Muslims were engaged in a struggle (*jihad*) to restore all things in the human and natural world, the line between sacred and secular gets blurred. Furthermore there ought to be no divisiveness or sectarianism in religion. Muhammad believed that Jews and Christians belonged to the same ancient faith. For example, the Christians of Medina were allowed to worship in the mosque "as an expression of the continuity of the Islamic tradition with the gospel." Muhammad did not expect Jews or Christians to convert unless they wanted to because he believed they had valid revelations of their own. (Armstrong, 226-227)

Now, unfortunately, this breakthrough, this revelation and belief in monotheism in actual practical application, is often what gets blamed for (and is the cause of) religious wars. I'll give you one example that Karen Armstrong writes about. When these same exiles (known as the *golah*) returned from captivity in Babylon, they immediately turned that revelation of God's inclusivity into a reason for exclusivity instead. Not only were the *goyim*--the gentile nations to be excluded, but even some of their own people. When the people of the old northern kingdom of Israel, known as Samerina, offered to help in the rebuilding of the Temple after the exile, they were rejected by the returning exiles! They were called the *am ha-aretz*, the "people of the land," members of the ten northern tribes and other Judeans, the children of those who had stayed behind. And in spite of the fact that prophets such as Ezekiel saw all twelve tribes as members of Israel and worthy of holiness, King Zerubbabel and Joshua his priest and their followers deemed that only the *golah*--the exiles constituted the true Israel, and even these Samaritans were seen as enemies.<sup>2</sup> Later, after the Torah became the official law code of Jerusalem under Nehemiah and Ezra, at one point even among the returned exiles men were commanded to send their foreign wives and children away to join the *am ha-aretz*. "Membership in Israel was now confined to the descendants of those who had been exiled to Babylon and to those who were

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<sup>2</sup> During Jesus' time this term '*am ha-'aretz*' was what people used to talk about the people out in the villages as he himself was. It was a perjorative term "to describe 'rude and ignorant people.'" And so they said to Jesus, "Can anyone good come out of the Nazareth." (Pagola, 60)

prepared to submit to the Torah," Armstrong writes, and goes on to point out that from then on this "ruthless tendency" to exclude other people would henceforth become a characteristic of the history of Jerusalem (not just or even mainly on the part of the Jews, mind you). But doesn't this seem to be the tendency of religion in general when it is in search of a kind of cultic purity? Some of the actions and attitudes of Roman Catholics seem to have a tendency this way these days too. I have heard more than one person say how they wouldn't mind a "smaller more faithful church," and how many discussions I have heard about who should be denied the Eucharist! I almost dare not bring up examples in contemporary Islam.

That same situation with the *golah* and the *am ha-aretz* played itself out in Jesus' time. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem passing through Samaritan land. And the people of the region won't offer him hospitality because he was on his way to Jerusalem. Those who had been excluded now become the excluders! The violent cycle of exclusion keeps churning. So the apostles offer to call down fire from heaven, but Jesus will not allow it. Jesus is bringing a new understanding of the law and it is this: concomitant to love the Lord your God is that nobody gets left out, not the blind, not the lame, the lepers, the tax collectors and prostitutes. (This was not a teaching exclusive to Jesus. Chaim Potok among others point to the great rabbi Hillel whose teaching a very similar to Jesus' own.) And who is my neighbor? Specifically the one who had been excluded: the Samaritan. Maybe this is because during Jesus' time this term '*am ha-aretz*' was what people used to talk about the people out in the villages as he himself was. It was a perjorative term "to describe 'rude and ignorant people.'" And so they said to Jesus, "Can anyone good come out of the Nazareth." (Pagola, 60) What may not be obvious at first is also that Jesus is a Galilean, and the Galileans had a special appreciation for the Israelite traditions of the north where Galilee was located. The gospels quote the northern prophets (Elijah, Elisha, Jonah) but rarely mention the kings and priests who were typical of Jerusalem and Judea. "They speak of the Israelites as 'children of Abraham' and avoid the theology of Zion and the holy city." Furthermore--and doesn't this add an interesting element to understanding Jesus?--the Galileans "were probably accustomed to a more relaxed interpretation of the law, and were less strict about certain purity laws than were the Judeans." (Pagola, 50)

(An aside, that story of Jesus heading to Jerusalem always reminds me on not being able to get to Israel in 2010 when we were in the Mideast, but we couldn't go because Syria would not give a visa to anyone who was on their way there, nor let someone back in the country if they had been. Chilling.)

So, somehow the way it gets interpreted and manifested, it seem as if it were built into the very structure of the Abrahamic faiths to be in competition with each other and with other religions and with other gods, and even within one's own ranks in search of cultic purity. And the Abrahamic faiths often get accused of intolerance because they manifest themselves not as a unity but as a kind of triumphant exclusivism. And so folks will contrast monotheism to the paganism of, say, the ancient Sumerians or Canaanites, or the polytheism of the Greeks and Romans, or Hinduism's henotheism, which are all seen as somehow more benign

and tolerant because they accept a variety of gods. This applies not just to back then, mind you, but also now. This is a very current argument. I'm using "pagan" in the modern sense here, not in any pejorative sense. There are many people nowadays who proudly refer to themselves as "neo-pagans," and their tolerance of the worship of many gods gets contrasted with monotheism's rejection of all that in the name of this one God. In some way this is a valid critique, because how many times and ways throughout history has monotheism become a kind of supremacism, simply a claim to the possession of the absolute truth as opposed to others who possess only illusions?

But actually this revelation of and understanding of God's Oneness (at least as James Carroll argues it) is supposed to serve as an antidote to violence and a repudiation of any kind of exclusivism, because this is not a god who is opposed to any creature or people--this is the God of *all* creatures and people. It's a fundamentally positive message. And this is certainly not a god who is opposed to creation in general, because this is the God who is the ground of all being, who purposefully created the world and pronounced it good (as Huston Smith loves to point out) and a God with whom, so Jesus accents, we are meant to be in intimate relationship.

And relationship is somehow the key: our relationship with God is only exclusive in the same sense that any love relationship is exclusive. As in a marriage, where the exclusivity of the love of one partner for the other is pro-creative, the relationship gives birth and opens itself up to inclusivity, to children, to relatives, and hopefully eventually to an ever wider circle, to neighbors, to the tribe, the nation, and finally opening up to strangers and foreigners, to universality. In Israel's case there was a certain what we call "scandal of particularity," this One God having chosen one particular people. But even here it's meant to move "through exclusiveness to inclusiveness," as a marriage would, from one people opening to all people. That's why Isaiah says they will be "a light to the nations." This is what Peter and Paul come to realize as they began their mission to the Gentiles—that nobody gets left out. This is the genius of the idea of election in the prophetic traditions, that it doesn't involve "the oneness of total union in which the individual is lost," and it's not about simple uniformity. Again, like a marriage, why the mystics of all three traditions resort to the language of marriage and bridal mysticism. Election is a union of communion, the union of a relationship in which separate beings, while remaining separate, nevertheless come together, a union in which fear of and opposition to each other gives way to friendship. Of course, we Christians believe that that is exactly what occurred in Jesus' new way, and he even says to his disciples, *I no longer call you servants, but my friends.*

The problem is not in the tradition, not in the religion; the problem is in us. We get it wrong. When we reduce God's oneness to an excluding monotheism, we get it wrong. When we think and act as if God's Oneness means that God is at war with other gods, we get it wrong. When we act as if union means the destruction of all difference, we get it wrong. No, union means *E pluribus unum*--from many to one. Bad religion is totalitarianism; good religion is union in diversity. The theme that stretches throughout the Bible going back to Abraham,

Moses, David, indeed to the very story of creation, is God's oneness, a "oneness that unites rather than destroys."

Thus the genius of Genesis, and of the religions that follow from it, is the insight that all that exists was and is created by the same God. More: all that exists was and is created in that God's image. Oneness, not cosmic war, is the ground of existence. God is One, and each of God's creatures participates in that Oneness, with humans as the creatures who know it, even if, having a genius for evil as well as good, [we] tend to imagine it otherwise. (Carrol, 303)

And so the response that Jesus gives when he is asked about the coin in the Gospel of Matthew--"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," he says, since Caesar's head is not it, "and give to God what belongs to God"--really begs the question, "What does not belong to God?" *The Lord's are the earth and its fullness.* God is one.

So what is the antidote to monotheism (or any spiritual tradition) being exclusivist and triumphalistic? Only a real conversion, an experience of God not being the God only of Christians (or Jews and Muslims or anyone), but God who is the God of all people who are struggling to understand the fullness of divinity in their own (and our own) sometimes feeble and immature stabs at worship; to see the oneness of God not being about a quantity but as a quality, to understand God as the ground of being itself, as the ground of awareness itself; and to see the image of God manifesting wherever we see beauty, truth or goodness manifesting, be it in a great work of art, the budding of an apple tree, a work of scientific genius, in another religion; to recognize it in any kind of self-donation from a simple act of kindness to world-changing social reforms. And to make of our hearts and our homes and our spiritual communities little places of this unity, unity in diversity where union means not a bland conformity and uniformity, but a celebration of the panopoly of unity in its beautiful diversity.

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