

February 26, 2006

Meatfare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

At the risk, I suppose, of being taken for a polytheist, let me confess to a strong personal misgiving about contemporary popular monotheism.

I shall describe what I mean. Modern popular monotheism is usually voiced along the following lines: "Since there is only one God, those who worship only one God must all be worshipping the same God." Those who think this way go on to urge us, often enough, to find our common moral roots in this supposedly shared monotheism. This effort will lessen international tensions, they assure us, and prepare the way for world peace. They have even been known to get together in large congresses to pray for world peace, as though they were all seeking this blessing from the same divinity.

Their venture strikes me not only as dubious and illogical but also as unbiblical. I submit that Biblical monotheism is not an agreement about a quantitative proposition with respect to the divinity. Biblical monotheism is not simply a matter of confessing one god, as distinct from two or more. Let me see if I can work myself around to an explanation.

First, those who confess only a Superior Being (a being who happens to be superior to other beings, that is to say) are not really monotheists, even if they deny the existence of all other gods. It is not the shortage of extra gods that renders a man a monotheist.

Second, the difference between polytheism and biblical monotheism is not merely quantitative. Monotheism is not a mathematical truth, nor is polytheism a mathematical problem. The thing is not quantitative. You can't get "close" to biblical monotheism. The confession of two gods comes no nearer to monotheism than the confession of a hundred. Biblical monotheism has less to do with the number of gods than with the nature of God.

Nor does man arrive at monotheism by a process of reduction, as it were, eliminating all other gods until only one is left. (Indeed, if a man goes at monotheism in this way, he may as well keep going to atheism,

freeing himself at last from the final burden of the process.) Monotheism is not the inference drawn from a set of premises.

Thus, and third, no matter how cogent the monotheistic thesis appears to the metaphysician, it is a historical fact that monotheism did not make its first appearance in this world as a metaphysical proposition. It was an auto-identification announced, rather, by a personal voice on Mount Sinai.

That is to say, monotheism first appeared as an intrusion into man's thought, not as a product of man's thinking. Although it is a perfectly rational thesis--indeed, far more rational than its alternatives--this monotheism was not attained by a rational process. It was declared by the voice from a burning bush. The other gods were rejected, not because man's mind no longer needed or wanted them, but because the One God would not tolerate them.

Since monotheism, as a metaphysical principle, makes perfect rational sense, how strange it is that man's mind had to be slapped and jarred into clear thinking on the subject by an insistent voice booming on a desert mountain.

Fourth, God did not tell us that He is one except by telling us Who He is. "Who He is" is what requires monotheism, not simply the inconvenience of rival gods. God's being is such that there can be no other. This is the metaphysics of Sinai.

In the metaphysics of Sinai, the fact that "God is" is identical with "Who God is." God is Who is, *Ho On*. The *Quis* is the same as the *Qualis*. The fact of God is inseparable from the "Who" of God. His being is identical with His existence. This is not some "superior being" speaking to lesser beings. This is Someone who *is* Being.

It is not human thought, then, that discovers this identification between God's being and His existence, but the pronouncement of the One who responded to Moses' request, "*Who* shall I say sent me?"

It is not as though the mind of man already knew there was a single God and Moses was simply trying to clarify a point or two on the question. On the contrary, monotheism itself came forth from the self-identifying "I" who, by intruding Himself into man's history, forced

Himself upon man's reflection. Authentic metaphysics was born of that intrusion.

It seems to me that this is not what we have today, when monotheism, separated from the historical revelation of Exodus, is pretty often just another form of idolatry, the confession of a god who just happens to be one rather than several. Indeed, such a god may as well be several, because there is nothing about him that requires him to be just one. He is no improvement over the gods of Egypt.

In some cases, in fact, he appears to be a good deal worse. I fear that this alleged divinity, this "shared god" of the so-called monotheistic religions may not be nearly so bland, so benign, so harmless as his more wishful thinking devotees take him to be. Look around. Some folks in this world who confess but one god are manifestly evil men, whose deeds are violent and whose feet are swift to shed blood. A sane person would prefer some kindly form of polytheism any day, don't you think?

Anyway, the oneness of the true God is specific to the true God. Other folks may worship a single god, but he is not *the* Existing One. Lacking the *Ho* of *Ho On*, he is not, so to speak, the genuine article.

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