Monotheism in World History: A Constructive or Destructive Force?

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At our last ISCSC meeting in Newark, the issue was raised whether monotheism has been a constructive or a destructive force in world history. I would like to add my voice to that discussion. It is obviously a very complex question, depending on how one defines monotheism. For my purposes, I will restrict my analysis to the Western Tradition, which for me is defined by the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In this case, monotheism is defined by the recognition of a creator god who stands outside of nature and is the lord of history, i.e. he is not an abstraction, an unchanging form, or being itself. In these traditions, he is the only divine power, who creates everything that exists and shapes its destiny according to his wisdom. Since he created mankind in his own image, he chooses in some sense to cooperate with mankind in working out his vision. No other power exists independent of him, and he is both just and compassionate, i.e. he both promotes a harmonious world and rescues those who are lost. While theologians argue about the details, this has been a powerful mythology in shaping world history.

From a contemporary point of view, this religious vision can easily seem outmoded and even dangerous, backward-looking and divisive, because it challenges the mythology of human progress, the “modern” commitment to autonomous individualism, the freedom to choose one’s own way of life, to shape the character of one’s own society. They see monotheism as dualistic, pitting “good” against “evil,” and resorting to violence to impose its will on others. They assume that progress means the disappearance of religion before the advancement of science, the liberation of the individual, the triumph of enlightened self-interest over dogma, the modernization of the world with a free economy and lightly constructed political institutions, indeed globalization, if not Americanization.

An historical approach to the issue, however, would challenge this simplistic view. It would argue that any objective view of the cultural process in history would recognize religion as powerful tool for cultural, indeed civilizational, formation and renewal. While there have been secularized periods in history, religion in its various forms has always
played an important role and there is no historical reason for believing that it will ever be different in the future.

The problem of religion today for the modernist is that it has not died out but seems to be growing stronger. The task of the historian is not to praise or blame religion or monotheism as such, but to understand how it plays a role in the historical process, sometimes for the good and sometimes for the bad. Sometimes it is a creative and sustaining force, but sometimes a destructive and divisive force. Religion can contribute to war and violence, but it can also contribute to peace and harmony. In my view, monotheism must be seen as a special case of religion in general and as a normal part of the cultural process.

For me, the civilizationalist point of view is not to focus on globalization, which destroys civilizations, but to focus on the historical process whereby humanity has created multiple civilizations, not just one or one sequence. These are civilizations that struggle for existence in competition with nature, and also with neighboring civilizations and nomadic societies. In my view, it is a Darwinian process. To survive, sometimes they must use violence to carve out a niche, to absorb or repel competitors, and to reform their disintegrating structures, and religion frequently plays a role in mobilizing the population. In the end, however, their use of violence is not the key to their historical significance, but their creativity, their effective institutions, and their ability in maintaining internal cooperation. All religions can be manipulated to advance or promote violent developments, but in the end they are more significant, in my view, in contributing to positive rather than negative forces.

Lately I have been greatly influenced by Patrick Kennon's book, *Tribe and Empire*. While its main hypothesis is overly simplified, especially in defining empire, I believe that he has pointed up a basic pattern in world history. He says that when an historical community's way of life is threatened, it will resort to tribalistic responses—namely, a highly emotional attack on the perceived threat which denies the humanity of the threat and thus makes it a virtue to slaughter them, man, woman and child. Tribal war is total war, a perceived fight for survival, where the niceties of "just war" theory are irrelevant. The community rallies around the flag and condemns anyone who criticizes its action as a traitor and suspected conspirator.

Fundamentally, civilization was constructed to overcome these tribal responses in order to allow various communities to cooperate in a larger society, but Keenen argues that civilizational restraint can easily
break down under pressure and release these destructive forces. He has a devastating critique of American history, for instance, in terms of its brutal racism, in destroying Native American communities, and repressing African-Americans and “Orientals”. He sees modern nationalism as largely a smokescreen for tribal reactions.

In history, however, it has often been the case that religion has been used to define communities, and even various forms of monotheism have been used in this manner, and thus religion can become the unifying and justifying force behind particular tribalistic violence. Even today, where ethnic identity and ways of life are being threatened, religion can become a powerful motivating and unifying force, justifying violence. In my view, the so-called fundamentalists who endorse violence in various parts of the world today are all basically tribalist reactions that are manipulating religion to legitimate their movements. If this is true, then the tribalism and its causes should be condemned, not the religious tradition itself.

Kennon argues essentially that civilization is a strategy for overcoming these tribalist reactions, to make possible the cooperation of large numbers of non-related people and groups, for their mutual advantage. While the definition of civilization is obviously controversial, especially in this group, this basic formula is very persuasive for me, and defines a major break-through in the evolution of human societies. But how was it accomplished?

I would argue that it does not come from economic prosperity, which normally comes after the break-through, not before, although a certain groundwork may be necessary. I would argue that it comes primarily through political action, but that this political action must be legitimized and stabilized by the acceptance of a new cultural map if it is to be more than momentary. In my view, it is the cultural map that is crucial, combined with political and economic developments, and it is the cultural map that makes a civilization creative, dynamic, and self-reforming, up to a point at least. And since cultural maps are diverse and unique to particular societies, there must be multiple civilizations in history, each with its own version of religion, law, and valuation. While philosophy and politics may argue that one civilization is superior to the others, and successful civilizations do tend to argue for their superiority, in my view, history does not provide a basis for this judgment. Each is unique and important for that reason alone.

Still, cultural maps in every society are fragile, subject to constant debate and reform; they can vary greatly in effectiveness in different
historical periods. When they disintegrate, however, the old tribal impulses reemerge, setting community against community in civil conflict. No civilization, even our own, is beyond this possibility, unless some creative reconstruction of the cultural map can bring the society back together. In my view, there are only three strategies for reinforcing an established cultural map, reforming it, or replacing it with another: liberal rationalist, tribalist, or religious.

The rationalist, Liberal strategy of enlightened self-interest and objective problem solving has many advantages. It is universalizing, theoretically impartial to special interests, and tolerant of non-threatening diversity, and so favored by “modern” society, but it is inherently elitist, non-emotional, and easily manipulated by powerful persons and groups. Its individualism can undermine constituent communities and families, and favor nothing higher than individual pleasure.

What I call the tribalist strategy appeals to the uniqueness of the community, its superiority and ancient tradition; it is powerfully emotional, binding all classes, but it frequently condemns neighboring cultures or societies who are threatening its distinctiveness, and has a hard time tolerating minorities. This strategy has been a powerful force in modern European history as nationalism, and has now been spread through most of the world. Its patriotic call to arms glorifies war and disguises its excesses, and can not prevent a dehumanizing of the enemy. It can thus fail to sublimate community identities into a greater ethnic unity and easily release the worse aspects of tribalism.

The third strategy, the religious strategy for creating or reforming a cultural map, is probably historically the most powerful, because it subordinates all individuals and all sub-communities to a common higher authority. It can create independent religious institutions not easy to control; it can produce “prophets” capable of speaking out boldly when religious principles are violated by special interests, and of generating reforms that are sometimes radical. It can bind all levels of a society together and challenge the legitimacy of rulers. It establishes a more or less clear set of values that define an acceptable way of life, create a noble tradition and a vision of the future, and can suggest supernatural punishments for disobedience. But religious institutions can be controlled, prophets silenced, and values and visions manipulated, until the religious mythology that supports the tradition is discredited and destroyed. It can thus fade before secularization, and it can be captured by threatened communities to justify their tribal outrage, or at least part of it can be captured.
Monotheism should be seen as a special case of the religious strategy, with its potential for creativity and reform, and also its susceptibility of being manipulated for tribal self-defense. On the whole, I will argue that monotheism's creativity outweighs its negative effects, but when the enemy is demonized as the creature of evil, it has the potential of deepening tribal ruthlessness. Still, tribalized versions of monotheism have usually been associated with small splinter groups, usually resisted by the mainstream of the religious community. It is difficult for any tribal movement to capture the whole of a major religion, and radical versions of the tradition are usually defeated after a while and dwindle away. No splinter group can completely control the interpretation of sacred texts or blot out the memory of tradition. The transcendent can never be completely controlled without ceasing to be transcendent.

Monotheism does not recognize a completely independent demonic force; that would be dualism. It can come very close, however, when a god of justice is fighting against rebels, who are headed towards eternal punishment and are, thus, not really redeemable. We would argue, however, that when some society decides that another society is nonredeemable and they are the agents of God's punishment, the conflict becomes tribal and thus fundamentally dualistic and a denial of monotheism.

If the Creator is the only god, He loves all of His creation and does not condemn any society to complete annihilation. God's punishment of rebels is temporary, selective, and individual, not collective and permanent. Monotheism uncorrupted sees resistance to God as a criminal matter if irreversible, or a matter of ignorance if reversible, but not a matter of mass slaughter of a community. As St. Paul said, "For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age." (Ephesians 6:12, TEV) In other words, the fight should be against the corrupting and evil forces in the world, not against individual persons.

Unless we believe in the Egyptian theory, or doubt the historicity of Abraham, monotheism was first developed by Moses and the ancient Israelites. In this belief system, God saved the Israelites from destruction at the Red Sea and than agreed to be their King. And until the Babylonian Captivity, one might argue that this divine King was in fact a tribal god, working to make a secure place for the tribes of Israel in a dangerous world. The conquest of the Promised Land was to be total,
although in fact it was not, and Samuel ordered the complete slaughter of the Amalekites. (1 Samuel 15)

On the other hand, the covenant God made with the Israelites required peace among the 12 tribes and the enforcement of justice, a peace that they broke, giving rise to the prophetic protest, and the unheard of claim that the “tribal” god would punish his own people more severely than non-believers. Israel was to be a “light to the Gentiles,” i.e. an example of a truly just society that could influence and transform other societies. This vision alone can explain the idealistic reforms associated with King Josiah and the idea of the Jubilee. This creative response to oppressive government has been a major contribution to civilization ever since.

One might argue that true monotheism only arose with the prophet, Second Isaiah, i.e. in a vision of a universal god of all peoples, creator and lord of history. It was part of a rethinking of the character of god brought about by the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem. Isaiah saw the Persian ruler Cyrus as God’s appointed savior, even though he did not know that that was his role. While there was also a nationalistic-tribalist reaction after the recovery of Jerusalem, Israel did not become an independent kingdom again, but a province in the Persian Empire, and its religious leaders proceeded to rewrite their traditions, including a new story of the Creation that was clearly universal.

If God were truly universal, He cared for the welfare of all peoples, even the hated Assyrians, as the book of Jonah dramatized. During the Roman period, there was a new tribalist reaction led by the Zealots, who incited a rebellion and a new destruction of Jerusalem. But even after defeat, and the loss of the Temple, the Jewish community survived because they had the vision of a universal God of compassion and justice that sustained them through good times and bad. The creative power of monotheism to sustain civilization and resist tribal hatreds has been demonstrated by this survival alone, despite severe testing.

Christianity was of course a reformed version of Judaism. In my view, Jesus was a revival of the prophetic voice and sought to raise the standards for a just society and add a depth of inner devotion, in contrast to the legalism of his day. He clearly rejected the use of violence to advance religion and chose the path of redemptive suffering. His teaching about loving one’s enemy, not resisting evil, and returning good for evil introduced a new interpretation to the understanding of monotheism.
St. Paul coupled this with a universal mission to all peoples on earth, since all human beings fundamentally stood before the one god in exactly the same condition, in need of divine help to overcome the forces of evil and to stand firm on principle. The object of life was seen as helping others, rather than competing with others. The pacifism of the first three centuries demonstrated this vision, even in the face of persecution. Growth brought compromises. St. Augustine accepted "just war" and the forced conversion of heretics, but only as an extension of God's discipline to erring individuals, not in indiscriminate violence. On the whole, one might argue that Christian monotheism contributed creativity and a strong sense of both compassion and justice to the civilizational process, and created two new civilizations, Byzantine and Western European.

Still one must acknowledge that Christian monotheism brought back the idea of holy war with the Crusades, and added its companions, slaughter of Jews and execution of heretics. Christian societies are certainly susceptible of corruption by tribalist reactions as are all other civilizations. The Medieval effort to Christianize society tried to take shortcuts. But the creativity of Medieval society in laying the foundations for constitutional government, developing an appreciation for individuality and a love of nature, and recognizing the community's responsibility for the poor and needy, come from its sense of a higher law and a responsibility to a compassionate and just God.

The religious wars of the Reformation need a different analysis. In my view, the Reformation was a major historical revolution attempting to reconstruct European society and change the course of development. In my view, all historical cycles are energized by such revolutions, and civilizations would decline if they failed to happen at key moments. All revolutions create civil wars, because all parties of a society will not be won over to the changes by persuasion because they sharply disagree about the nature of those changes. The struggle demands a reexamination of all aspects of the civilizational tradition and the search for new compromises, but when it becomes heavily ideological, it can in effect create tribal communities fighting to the death. In spite many efforts in the 16th Century to negotiate a compromise, this proved impossible and did in fact lead to violence and rigidity in some parties. Historically, of course, the religious wars discredited religion and led to the secularization of European society.

If, however, we argue that revolutions are a necessary renewal force in history, the source of continuing creativity in changing histori-
cal circumstances, then we must be careful not to put all the blame for violence on the ideologies that are utilized in forming political factions. Any ideology, whether religious or not, can be corrupted by tribal hatreds. Monotheist religions should be aware of this corruption and resist, but the passions of the moment easily take precedent over ideological faithfulness. Christians can embrace war as enthusiastically as any non-Christians when they perceive their community threatened with destruction.

The French Revolution was not religious in the usual sense, not monotheist, but it produced a civil war between liberal revolutionaries and conservative traditionalists that was quickly turned into tribal warfare by rising nationalism. This nationalism problem has continued through the 20th Century. And yet we do not automatically condemn Liberalism and Rights of Man as a destructive force in civilization, the way some do with monotheism. We value its creativity and vision of justice and freedom, but also acknowledge that it can be corrupted by tribalist passions.

I have saved Islam as the third monotheist tradition to the last because it came last historically and because it is the source of much of the negative evaluation of monotheism current today. Islam, perceived by Muhammad as a successor to Judaism and Christianity, began in a frontier region dominated by nomadic tribal society, and historically it can be described as a super tribe with its stress on the umma, the brotherhood of all believers. Indeed, one can argue that if Muhammad had not treated the umma as a tribe fighting for survival in a dangerous world, it would not have survived. Consequently, the Koran has some powerful passages calling on the faithful to fight for God and to put their personal survival aside in order to save the community, the well known passages about jihad.

However, I believe that Muhammad never really saw Islam as one tribe among others, but rather as a universal brotherhood of all persons in the world, a brotherhood of peace and justice, the solution to the chaos of the tribal society he knew and the reflection of the monotheism that he preached. When he brought his army to the walls of Mecca, he did not proceed to slaughter the people of a rival tribe, but made of a treaty of peace, much to the disgust of his more passionate and tribalist followers. He was not interested in destroying the people of Mecca, but expanding the brotherhood of peace. He required all of his tribal allies to pledge themselves to peace with fellow believers and to settling disputes by arbitration. He extended protection to the People of the
Book who accepted Islamic overlordship, including the rights to continue using their own language, religion, laws and officials indefinitely. (This of course does not excuse his destruction of the Jews in Medina earlier.)

On principal, Muslims did not coerce conversions, although practice sometimes differed. The ideal vision of a just and peaceful society, where all individuals submit to the higher wisdom of God, created a new civilization and sustained its later reforms and enabled it to survive later crises.

Yet those passages in the Koran from the early tribal beginnings have authorized some Muslims to defend their community when they perceive it threatened by outside forces based on rival ideologies. How can Americans criticize Muslims for defending their heritage when we are ready to use any violence to defend our heritage? Just as Christians do not have a right to impose their values upon Jews, and Humanists have no right to impose their values on Christians, so Westerners have no inherent right to impose their values on the Islamic world.

Civilizations have a right to disagree, debate, and try to persuade other civilizations, but not to threaten their way of life. Civilizations have a right to defend themselves within their own territories if attacked, and if dialogue does not secure relief, but both sides in a conflict must be sensitized to the threatening power of tribalism to absolutize conflict, to turn disagreements to violence instead of arbitration, and thus to weaken and destroy civilization.

All religions can be corrupted to re-enforce tribal passions, but monotheism should look to its foundations, to its universalist principles and its respect for all human life under one and the same god. Justice demands the appropriate punishment of criminals in all societies, not the use of torture and indiscriminate destruction. If we promote respect for all civilizations, not just our own, which is our responsibility as civilizationalists, then we should be ready to challenge oversimplifications of the complex processes of history. Monotheism can be an ideology that disguises the real issues by creating a dualism of good vs. evil, demonizing the perceived enemy, but dualism is not really monotheism.

**Recommended Reading List**

Anderson, Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament*, 3rd Ed.

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