

MONOTHEISM: THE UNSURPASSED SCOURGE AND SCANDAL

Ramakrishna Puligandla
Emeritus Professor of Philosophy
The University of Toledo
Toledo, OH, USA

The purpose of this brief essay is to examine the concept of monotheism and show that the monotheistic religious traditions, simply by being what they are—based on blind faith, anti-intellectualism, dogmatism, fanaticism, and intolerance—have done and continue to do more harm than good to the world. The Hebrews are admired and lauded as the people who gave the world monotheism, thereby banishing polytheism and idolatry; Christianity and Islam are also monotheistic traditions, with their foundations in Judaism (the Hebraic tradition). These three monotheistic religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are collectively known as the “Abrahamic traditions.” Judaism, being ethnocentric, is not a missionary religion; but its offsprings, Christianity and Islam, have been missionary religions with unmatched zeal and commitment to convert heathens, idolaters, and infidels into their own traditions. The result of the missionary activities, of Christianity and Islam, are tragic and deadly, in that they involved so much self-righteousness, total blindness, intolerance, violence, cruelty, and death. I am not here concerned with cataloging the litany of horrors the monotheistic traditions are guilty of. Rather, I am concerned with a systematic analysis of the concept of monotheism and show that the very concept is responsible for all the intolerance, violence, and unspeakable horrors.

The thesis of monotheism, proclaimed by the Hebrews and subsequently accepted and acclaimed by Christianity and Islam, as the most profound and liberating insight, is in fact not profound at all. If anything, its intellectual foundations, if any, are the weakest and most questionable and hence cannot withstand genuine intellectual scrutiny. Let me immediately point out that it is not just the Abrahamic traditions that uphold the thesis of monotheism; almost all peoples and civilizations, including Native Americans,¹ Africans, and a host of others subscribe to this thesis. Why do so many peoples across the world, irrespective of their ethnic, geographic, linguistic, economic, social, and political differences—cultural differences—so vehemently defend the monotheistic thesis? I shall now proceed to answer this central and fundamental question. I most earnestly hope that the reader will subject my answer to systematic examination, from phenomenological and analytical standpoints and come to his/her own conclusion. I should be most gratified to hear any and all objections to my answer, and I hereby promise that I will take into account the objections and criticisms and most appropriately respond to them.

All people wonder about there being a world at all and then go on to ask how the world came to be and offer their own answers and explanations. It is like someone seeing a table and asking how it came to be. Then someone will say that the table was made by a carpenter and just so the world is made by God, the cosmic carpenter, known in monotheistic traditions as the First Cause. But when one rationally asks, “who made the carpenter, what is the cause of the carpenter, how did the carpenter himself come about?” the monotheists will tell you that God is the First Cause and is not the effect of any cause. It is clear then that, according to the monotheists, there is God who is not caused by anything but causes the world. It is obvious that the law of causation has broken down here, in that there is God Who is not caused by anything. Why should one accept the claim that there is God Who causes the world but is not Himself caused by anything? The monotheistic answer to this objection is that one should accept their answer on faith. But when one appeals to faith as an answer, one has opted oneself out of rational discourse. This opting out of rational inquiry and discourse is the hallmark of all monotheistic traditions. And since the monotheist cannot provide a rational answer to this most fundamental question, he/she resorts to persuasion, through threats of hell and eternal damnation, and thereby to any and all means of converting the questioner, including gifts and rewards as well as subjugation, violence, and death itself. Simply think of the inquisitions and burnings at stake of countless people by Christians and Muslims. What is most tragically remarkable is that the inquisitors and burners at the stake say that they had to do the inquisitions and burn people in order to save the souls of the heretics! All these acts of the highest cruelty are justified by the monotheists as done in the name of their God(s) who, they claim, taught love, kindness, and charity even toward one’s enemies (remember turning the other cheek?).

When a monotheist asks you whether you believe in God, you should never answer the question but instead ask the monotheist, “which God?” for there is the God of the Jews (Who chose them as His people), there is the Christian God (the Son of God) who sacrificed Himself in order to redeem the world of its sins, and there is Allah, the God who inspired the prophet Mohammed to found Islam. Jews, Christians, and Muslims loudly proclaim that there is just ONE God (monotheism) but went through centuries of mutual persecutions and religious wars, for example, the Crusades, which continue in our own day under various disguises. How is one to explain this most paradoxical state of affairs, resulting in unspeakable horrors and enormous human suffering? Here below is my explanation, which at once clarifies the scourge and scandal of monotheism.

There is the ultimate reality, which cannot be grasped by the senses and mind; it is inconceivable and imperceivable. Human beings, struck by the fact that there is a world at all, try to explain the being of the world by attempting to conceive that which is not conceivable; and different peoples

come up with different conceptions of the inconceivable, each conception being a product of various factors, such as the geographic, linguistic, social, political, economic, and so on. The concept of that which cannot be conceived at all is the God of each of the monotheistic traditions. Simply put, God is merely a conception of ultimate reality, the inconceivable. Each monotheistic religious tradition thus comes to have its own conception of the inconceivable (ultimate reality), its God, and goes on to proclaim that its own conception is the true and real, and declares other peoples' conceptions as false and therefore feels the need to have the other peoples abandon their own conceptions and convert them to its own conception. In this manner arise religious conflicts, among peoples who zealously proclaim monotheism.

One might now ask, "how does one know that there is the ultimate reality?" The answer to this question is as follows: None can deny that there is a world; and differently constituted (psycho-physiologically) sentient beings experience the world differently; simply imagine our optic nerves being differently arranged; then our experience of colors and depth will certainly be different from what it now is. Do cats, dogs, etc. have their own worlds? Yes, since they are constituted differently from each other and ourselves. The worlds of cats, dogs, and human beings overlap only insofar as their constitutions also overlap. If there are sentient beings elsewhere in the cosmos, do they experience the world in the same way we do? Certainly not, for their experience of the world depends upon and is bound up with their constitutions—their perceptions and conceptions will be different from those of ours. Their world and our world will have commonalities to the extent that their constitution and ours overlap. What all this means is that there is a single reality (ultimate reality) and are many worlds, each world being an appearance of the single reality to beings constituted in a certain manner. Thus the relationship of the reality to worlds is a one-many relationship. It should be abundantly clear by now that that which appears to (and experienced by) differently constituted beings as different worlds is the ultimate reality. This reality cannot, in principle, be grasped by the senses and mind, for whatever can be grasped by and experienced through the senses and mind is a world—an appearance of the ultimate reality. Why is the ultimate reality inconceivable and imperceivable? Whatever one can conceive of and perceive is inevitably and ineluctably an object (a phenomenon), as different from other objects (phenomena). If you are wondering as to what "phenomenon" means, here is the definition: "phenomenon" is anything that is (or can in principle be) an object of consciousness. All phenomena exist in time, although some phenomena also exist in space; thus tables, chairs, people, stars, trees, exist in both space and time, whereas thoughts, emotions, mental images, dreams, etc. exist only in time. Ultimate reality is not conceivable and perceivable by the senses and mind, since it is not an object; for were it an object, there would be objects

other than itself (besides it) and then it is not ultimate reality; it should be clear by now that ultimate reality is that besides which nothing exists.

Why is ultimate reality indescribable? Because, “description” presupposes the distinction between description and the described; and since there cannot be anything besides ultimate reality by which to describe it, it logically follows that ultimate reality is indescribable (as an example, consider the statement, “the rose is red.” This statement presupposes the distinction between the rose and redness—an object and a property). To reiterate the point, such distinctions are not available in regard to ultimate reality. Hence ultimate reality is ineluctably and absolutely indescribable.

In keen contrast, the God(s) of various monotheistic religions are describable and are, as a matter of fact, described. The God of the Hebrews chose them as His people and gave them the Ten Commandments, the Christian God (The Son of God) sacrificed Himself in order to redeem the world of its sins, and Allah inspired Mohammed as the last prophet in the Abrahamic traditions, resulting in Islam. Interestingly enough, the Abrahamic traditions refer to their God(s) in the masculine gender—the Father, the King, the Prime, and so on. These observations clearly confirm my fundamental thesis that God is a conception of the inconceivable ultimate reality. There is a single reality and there are many different conceptions of it and hence many different monotheistic traditions.

Each of the three monotheistic traditions claims that its scripture is the word of God (the literal meaning of “scripture”). But then one wonders as to why God speaks in different languages. The Old Testament is in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek, and the Koran in Arabic. One might say that God speaks in different languages to different peoples. This is a reasonable explanation, for after all, it is eminently sensible that one cannot communicate with a people through a language other than their own. But one would expect that God gives the same message (scripture) and instructions to all the peoples to whom He speaks. Such, however, I am sad to note, is not at all the case; for not only are there contradictions between one scripture and another, but also within a scripture itself. How to make sense of this undeniable fact? Here is my answer: the so-called scriptures are written by human beings and were revised many times and voted upon at various councils, called upon and managed by kings and religious leaders, as to the texts to be included in the scripture and those to be excluded, along with the authoritative (and hence the only acceptable) interpretation of the included texts. But when people interpreted them in their own ways, conflicts arose, and hence the various divisions, schisms, and denominations of the monotheistic religions—Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, Methodist, Orthodox Jews, Reformed Jews, the Sunnis, the Shiites, and so on. The results of contradictions within a scripture and among scriptures and their interpretations are intolerance, dogmatism,

persecution, violence, and death itself. It is remarkable that the monotheists fail to realize that their scriptures are not words of God but products of human activities, products of conceptions and perceptions.

There are the alleged proofs for the existence of God in all monotheistic traditions, produced by their philosophers and theologians—Anselm, Thomas, Descartes, etc. Why are proofs needed for the existence of God? Because, God is a particular being, described as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent; and when one makes the claim that a certain kind of being exists, others will ask, “what is the proof such a being exists?” Let me immediately emphasize that all these proofs are open to serious rational criticisms and objections, which cannot, in principle, be answered and put to rest. When someone claims that there exists in the cosmos a deer with three thousand heads (a particular being), we are fully entitled to ask how that person came to know this and what we should do in order to confirm or disconfirm the claim. In the same manner, when someone claims that there is God, the Hebraic, the Christian, and the Islamic, with specific attributes and relations, we are entitled to ask the person as to how he/she came to know this and what we should do in order to confirm or disconfirm the claim. The monotheists have no rational answer to this question and go on to claim that it is a matter of faith. But then there arises the question, “there are so many faiths and why should one consider YOUR faith as the true and real and those of others are false and pernicious?” The monotheist has no rational answer to this question; “he or she simply appeals to the faith, over and over again, and tells you that if you do not accept the faith as the true and real, you will be damned eternally to hell—eternal damnation.” Such is the rationality of the monotheistic religious traditions.

The monotheists claim that their main, central, and fundamental contribution to the world is the banishment of polytheism and idolatry, characteristic of the heathens and infidels, thereby educating and enlightening them to embrace monotheism, the only true and truly liberating and hence salvatory knowledge and wisdom. But do monotheists really not have any idols? The Jews carry the Torah (The Sacred Scroll), the Christians have the Cross, and the Muslims the Kaaba (a shrine at Mecca containing the Sacred Black Stone) and no matter where they are, Muslims turn toward Mecca when they pray, as if their God, Allah, has directional properties, like a vector or a tensor. Let me also mention here that the Jews go to the Wailing Wall; the Catholic and Orthodox Greek and Russian churches have icons of Jesus and Virgin Mary. What do all these facts point to? If one is truly against idolatry, one should not have any OBJECTS one considers sacred in one’s religious pursuit. What is most paradoxically remarkable is that it does not occur to monotheists (and people in general) that idols are not just physical objects but also include concepts and conceptions. Every monotheist, insofar as he/she describes his or her God, has a conception(s)

they worship. Since a monotheist worships a conception, he or she is guilty of idolatry, which he/she passionately abhors, and is single-mindedly committed to eradicating it by any means, including violence, war, and death. All these observations clearly show that as long as there are conceptions, so long will there be idolatry.

Hinduism has long been singled out by the three monotheistic religions (the Abrahamic traditions) as profoundly guilty of idolatry. These monotheists have failed to grasp the deep and most subtle aspects of idolatry found in Hinduism. Hinduism, in its various forms, distinguishes the formless ultimate reality from our conceptions of that reality; all these conceptions are the Gods of different religions. As has been pointed out earlier, each of these conceptions arose under different circumstances of geography, language, economics, socio-political arrangements, etc. According to Hinduism, I mean the Upanishadic Hinduism, no people can claim that their own conception of ultimate reality is the true and correct one and dismiss other peoples' conceptions as false. Since ultimate reality is formless (and hence nameless), no people's conception of it is to be regarded as the true, the one and only true. Hinduism goes further in saying that each human being can have his or her own conception (of ultimate reality) and therefore worship God in any form that pleases him or her. That form is the personal God, Ishwara, which could be male, female or androgenous. This is the reason that there are so many Gods in Hinduism, each being a certain conception of the inconceivable ultimate reality. Without understanding this profound insight against dogmatism and closed minds, monotheists vigorously denounce Hinduism as polytheistic and idolatrous. Simply put, Hinduism has so many gods because it acknowledges the Gods of all peoples.

But, one might ask, "what is the need for idols?" Idols are symbols and refer to Gods as per different peoples' conceptions; and human beings, being frail and feeble, need symbols in order to concentrate on what the symbols refer to. This is the reason even monotheistic traditions have symbols, iconic as well as aniconic. Only true yogins and mystics have no use for symbols, either physical or non-physical (conceptions).

Monotheists, while proclaiming that there is one God, fight each other, because there are conflicting conceptions of that one God; to say that there is just one God is one thing and to describe and correctly identify that God is another. Thus the Gods of the monotheistic traditions differ from each other and therefore the inescapable conclusion is that there are many Gods.

Are the Gods unreal? No, they are neither real nor unreal; that is, they are appearances of the ultimate reality. God is not real because it is an appearance, a product of conditioning; God is not unreal, for if God were

unreal, like the square-circle or the son of a barren woman, God could never be an appearance. We hear reports from time to time that somewhere a Christian saw a Cross in the sky, the Virgin Mary, or Jesus; why didn't he or she see Rama, Krishna, Shiva, or Allah?

The answer is clear: being a Christian, the person is conditioned to experience certain appearances and not others; what one claims to see is thus a product of conditioning arising from the larger matrix of one's tradition. But since one foolishly and uncritically thinks (and is conditioned to think) that what appears to him or her is the reality, the true reality, one feels compelled to dismiss what appears to other people as false and convert them to their own tradition. In this manner arise intolerance, cruelty, violence, wars and death, resulting in enormous human suffering. All monotheistic traditions are organized religions and have central authorities, who control the thought and conduct of their followers, with threats of excommunication and expulsion. Remember Al Halaj and Giordano Bruno?

Let me conclude this paper with a few pertinent observations about things happening right now: 1) A high-ranking official of the U.S. armed forces recently told Muslims, "my God is bigger than your God." Can you imagine a Hindu telling someone, "my God is bigger than your God or my Brahman (Atman) is bigger than yours?" Or a Buddhist claiming, "my Emptiness is more empty than your Emptiness?" Or a Taoist saying, "my Tao is taller than your Tao?"; 2) Ann Coulter, darling of the political conservatives and author of some best-sellers, exhorted the Western powers to invade all Arab countries, kill their leaders, and convert Muslims to Christianity; 3) A large proportion of Muslims around the world are most enthusiastically committed to Jihad against all non-Muslim peoples; 4) Pope John Paul II exhorted Christians in general and Catholics in particular not to engage in Yoga and meditation, for they are auto-hypnosis and cohorting with the Devil; 5) Pope Benedict XVI wrote in one of his books that Buddhism is nothing but an exercise in auto-eroticism; yes, the Pope, a priest all his life, and therefore allegedly never having had any relationships with women, is eminently qualified to talk about auto-eroticism; 6) All of us are keenly aware of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, a conflict between the followers of two monotheistic traditions; and 7) Who are the people still fighting Darwin? Not Hindus, Buddhists, or Taoists, but monotheists. These facts bear witness to the scourge and scandal of monotheism of which I speak.

In light of all the above observations, I wish to emphasize the need for education that will contribute to the elimination of religious intolerance and violence and thereby to the enhancement of human wellbeing.

Notes

- 1) It should be emphasized, however, that the Native American monotheism is profoundly different from that of the Abrahamic traditions, in that the Great Spirit of the former, like the Brahman of Upanishadic Hinduism, is both immanent and transcendent.