

Chapter 32

Radical Monotheism as Center of Value

In this chapter I will illustrate the profound humanness quality of ethical thoughtfulness by offering a summation of a Christian writer's awareness of a fresh basis for discerning responsible action. Perhaps a Jewish writer or a Muslim writer or a Buddhist writer could be chosen to illustrate this, but it has been H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* who has inspired me to see a genuinely universal basis for responsible action that applies to any community (religious or otherwise) that is recovering profound humanness in this era of history.

Radical monotheism, as elaborated by H. Richard Niebuhr, has to do with value and ethics.¹ The core question is: What is good? What is best for the loyalty, devotion, and cause of my life, and of our lives as an organization, a region, a state, a nation, or a species of life? "Radical monotheism," as defined by Niebuhr, is one of three prominent answers that are being given to the fundamental question of ethics. The other two answers he named "polytheism" and "henotheism." Curious as these three terms may seem, they point to basic alternatives for determining ethical action for any human life or any society.

Polytheism

As an answer to the question of value and ethics, polytheism means having many centers of value that comprise a pantheon of loyalties for my life or for our lives as a social group. Those centers of value might include: family, work, sex, pleasure, money, self esteem, companionship, approval, power, status, variations on all of these, and many more centers of value. We all tend to begin our living with this poly-loyalty arrangement of choosing our course in life. Soon, we may discover that these various centers of value fight with each other. Both family and job can each seem to demand our whole lives. Our dedications to both pleasure and work may also tear us in two. Many centers of value fight for claims, perhaps ultimate claims, on our time. And finally, we experience the sad truth that each of these centers of value can let us down. Family can die or leave us. Job can disappear or turn sour. Forms of pleasure can simply end forever. All these meaning-givers in our polytheism of values can enter the twilight of no longer functioning as meaning-givers that we can trust. These are the weaknesses of a polytheistic ethics: (1) the meaning givers war with each other, and (2) they each let us down.

Henotheism

As an answer to the question of value and ethics, henotheism is the attempt to find a unifying cause or value that provides overall unity and dependability within which all our other values can take their relative place. This usually means making some culture, subculture or religious group the overarching meaning and significance of my life and action. Religious in-groups can easily manifest this henotheistic quality. Members may literally worship the group rather than any god or goddess the group may talk about. In modern times, the nation has also been given henotheistic standing – my nation right or wrong – mine is the greatest nation on Earth – being a patriot is my core value. Nationalism usually means projecting my view of being a patriot upon all the other members of my nation, whom I may view as subversive if they disagree with me about my nationalism. Henotheism can also mean making my racial group or cultural group my overarching center of value and action. Finding the group membership that make

¹ Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Radical Monotheism in Western Culture* (New York: 1943 --1970, Harper Torchbooks)

my life worth while is a strong draw, even if that means contempt and even violence toward other groups. Humanism is also a form of henotheism in which my center of value is the whole human species – whatever is good for humankind is good and whatever disadvantages humankind is bad. This center of value excludes the values of other species or the natural planet as a whole. Our henotheism can be expanded to include all living forms, yet this center of value is still henotheistic, not radical monotheism, because it does not include the inanimate aspects of reality. Henotheism differs from polytheism in that it attempts to find a unifying cause for my life, and it differs from monotheism in that it opts for a range of values that is less than the Whole of what is Real.

Radical Monotheism

As an answer to the question of value and ethics, radical monotheism includes everything, inanimate and living, in its scope of values. Everything is good because it IS. The radical monotheistic center of value is a loyalty and a devotion to the Source from which all emergents emerge and into which all that has emerged returns. Birthing and dying are equally valuable parts of the whole process of Reality. Coming and going, big and little, pleasant and painful, growing and rotting are all valuable because each process is a manifestation of the Overarching Process of Reality to which loyalty is being given. And “Reality” in this definition does not mean my or someone’s sense of reality, but the encountered Reality that is constantly a surprise, a mystery, and enigma beyond understanding by the human mind.

It is often the case that monotheism degenerates into a set of ideas that are used to make sense of things, whereas monotheism means a commitment to THAT GRAND NONSENSE that never makes complete sense to our fragile minds. Monotheism can also degenerate into the belief that my group and its beliefs is the one and only truth holder. This is henotheism not monotheism.

The “mono” in “monotheism” means that there is a single overriding loyalty, the Real. The core ethical question becomes, “What is Real?” Good and evil no longer mean two aspects of what is Real. The Real is the good and the good is the Real. “Evil” within the radical monotheistic value-perspective means any denial of the Real – any hatred of the Real, any illusion that masks the Real, any escape that flees the Real, and any a fight with the Real that seeks to win against THAT which cannot be defeated. Such hopeless conflict with invincible Reality is appropriately called “despair.” And despair, as we have seen, is joined with malice to self and others and with bondage to some moralism or licence that substitutes for our deep freedom. Radical monotheism includes the release of the profound qualities of trust, compassion, and freedom.

Theism

The “theism” in polytheism, henotheism, and monotheism does not mean belief in gods or goddesses, or in a supreme being alongside other beings. The gods and goddesses of ancient polytheism were stories about processes within the human psyche or within the human interactions with the environments of human living. Polytheism does not mean taking these stories literally. The gods and goddesses do not exist as literal beings observable by scientific examination or contemplative inquiry. For example, Venus and Mars are just stories about the dynamics of love and war. Polytheism can include loyalty and commitment to both love and war and many other centers of value.

Similarly, radical monotheism is not a belief in One God that rules over all the other gods and goddesses, angels and devils, gremlins and fairies, and other visualizations and fictions about aspects of our lives. Radical monotheism has nothing to do with

beliefs in beings or in a being. Radical monotheism is a devotion, a loyalty, a trust in what is Real where Reality is always a more than our thoughts about Reality. Reality is an ongoing surprise to whatever is our current sense of reality. In radical monotheism we are loyal to a Reality whose Wholeness is beyond our rational comprehension; nevertheless, with our consciousness we can experience conscious connection with this Unifying Mysterious Every-thing-ness. A core devotion this Reality relativizes all our other devotions to the many aspects of our lives. These devotions can remain as relative centers of value in our living, but in radical monotheism we have opted for the One center of value that renders our lives flexible with regard to all other values.

For example, the “oneness” of devotion meant by radical monotheism is not of the same quality as the oneness of devotion meant by choosing our nation as our one overriding center of value. Though we are part of our nation and our nation is part of us, we are more than our nation. The reality of our lives is more than the presence and destiny of our nation. A devotion to Reality includes a devotion to all nations. Similarly, radical monotheism is more than a devotion to humanity; monotheism includes devotion to all beings, living and inanimate. The One center of value that constitutes radical monotheism is Reality as the Quintessence and Entirety of what is Real.

This Quintessence is more than a concept. It can be experienced. It can be visited. It can become a steady station of our consciousness in which we dwell. It can be experienced as our profound humanness, for that is what it is. Profound humanness is merely the inward experience of loyalty to the Final Reality to which radical monotheism is loyal. Radical monotheism can become the trust and devotion and loyalty of our lives. It can become the cause for which we live and die. And people who so live are around us at every moment. The possibility of joining those who so live is present in every moment, provided that we see that all the other centers of value are untrustworthy, passing, limiting, finite, temporal, and quite often obsessive and compulsive loyalties that carry us to the pits of despair. Any other-than-monotheistic center of value can be made a substitute for Reality and thereby destroy our lives as realistic living until we see that this misconstrued loyalty is just part of our lives – that our life is much larger, a life that encompasses all the relative centers of value within that more inclusive mode of living that defines the monotheistic openness to everything.

Radical Monotheism and Science

Natural science is a method or approach to what is True. In that sense, natural science is a servant of radical monotheism. The discoveries of science are discoveries of what is real and thus enrichments of our radical monotheism. But the formulations of scientific knowledge are always partial, incomplete, open to further advances in the process of science. So any current scientific formulation is not the Quintessence of Reality; it is only a humanly invented level of understanding of some part of Reality. Nevertheless, the process of science is an approach to Truth and, therefore, compatible with radical monotheism. Yet the specific results of science can be “idols” that radical monotheism opposes because they are not the fullness of Reality.

A good scientist can be a radical monotheist. This is observable in the consciousness of those scientists who have come to see that “the more we know about nature, the more we know we don’t know.” Our scientific advances do not bring us to some promised land of absolute knowledge; rather, they open up even more unknowns to be explored. But scientific advances are still advances, each advance is more real than the formulations over which it is an advance. The “progress” of science is a journey into what we truly experience to be so. This is not understood by all philosophers of science. The keystone of science is the actual experience of our senses. Obviously, what

we sense is conditioned, or at least shaped by, what we believe before we sense it. But our sensations, when we are fully open to them, can challenge what we believe, can challenge what our whole society has believed for a very long time. This willingness to let sensations challenge beliefs is the key to competent scientific research. This openness to being challenged shows us how science, as a method, is compatible with the loyalty of the radical monotheist.

Many philosophers of science notice that modern scientific experiments are very complex and very distant from the everyday experience of our senses. Many of us cannot, even in our imaginations, reduplicate the complex interpretations of the light gathered by immense telescopes from galaxies billions of miles away. Nor do most of us understand the explorations that use huge atom-smashing cyclotrons into the microcosm of nature's smallest constituents. It can seem to us that we are stuck with simply trusting scientists in what they say rather than actually knowing how scientists arrived at their current formations of truth. As true as this is, it is also true that these scientists are trustworthy only to the extent that their science is referencing actual experiences of the senses. And if we were to become competent scientists in their field, we could also observe with our own senses whether these advances are indeed advances into truth or not. Any philosophy of science is bogus that does not keep in touch with the fact that a scientific advance is trustworthy only when a community of scientists can witness that this new formulation of truth is compatible (or incompatible) with what can be seen, heard, smelled, felt, tasted, or otherwise sensed with our human senses.

Radical Monotheism and Contemplative Inquiry

The human senses are not, however, the only source of truth. The human senses cannot sense consciousness. The human senses can only sense the behaviors and the reports of conscious beings. Consciousness is assumed by scientists, but it cannot be explored by them as scientists. Consciousness, often called subjectivity, is a secret known to scientists, but rigorously excluded from the objectivity of scientific research. Science is objective in its tests for truth. Subjectivity as a test for truth is purposefully and faithfully avoided. This is both the grandeur of science and its limitation. It cannot explore the nature of our consciousness or of our consciousness of consciousness itself.

All exploration of consciousness is explored by a conscious human noticing consciousness within her or his own being. These inward noticings can be shared with other noticers of their own consciousness. We thereby construct a community of discussion about consciousness. All good art is a sharing of these inward noticings. Much psychology and philosophy is also a sharing of these inward noticings. Religion is good religion only if its assertions are rooted in this inward noticing. Psychology, philosophy, and religion may combine their inward noticings with the scientific type of knowing, but competent thinking must remain clear about what is known as a result of scientific research and what is known as a result of contemplative inquiry.

Radical monotheism is compatible with both scientific research and contemplative inquiry. Anyone who is looking honestly at her or his own consciousness and reporting accurately about it is a potentially trustworthy source of truth. And all truth, from whatever source, is consistent with the devotion, loyalty, and cause of the radical monotheist.

Radical Monotheism and Social Ethics

It is of utmost importance to understand that Radical Monotheism is a context that leads to action in the social sphere. Radical Monotheism is the vocation of living one's whole life in a context of value that relativizes every limited center of value and lives

from this inclusive center of value: the real is the good and the good is the real. This means that everything that scientific work discovers to be real is good and that everything that contemplative inquiry discovers to be real is good. And further, radical monotheism, as a center of value, challenges us to integrate our scientific truth and our contemplative truth into a workable program of action for our whole lives in the service of the whole Earth and the whole destiny of humans on this Earth. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been traditions that emphasize social ethics and justice as a consequence of the radical monotheism that these traditions carry. As finite religions in real world history, these traditions also carry perversions of radical monotheism – most often this perversion takes the form of a henotheism of group morality and/or group dogma. This decay of radical monotheism into an in-group self-worship is a temptation faced by every group. Such decay robs social ethics of its flexibility and revolutionary power. It warps the ongoing quest for realistic social justice into an imposition of my group’s ethical and moral thinking upon all humanity and the planet. When radical monotheism is our center of value, the ethical sphere is broken open for perpetual creativity.

Radical Monotheism and Religion

All religion is a finite construction created by human beings. At its best religion points beyond itself to that which is not finite but which is the everlastingly True and Real. Good religion points beyond its ethical moralities and its dogmatic teachings to a depth of human experience that cannot be contained in any finite ideas, social shapes, or humanly practiced processes. Radical monotheism has to do with openness to the fullness of surprising Mysterious Reality; therefore radical monotheism cannot be contained within any religious forms – dogmas, moralities, or communal forms.

For example, Christianity as a historical community of religions has entered an era of history in which its old dogmas, moralities, and communal forms have become ever more obviously obsolete in relation to the scientific truth, the contemplative truth, and the ethical challenges of our times. All hope for a continuation of what has been central and best about the Christian religious tradition rests on a recovery of radical monotheism. Moses and the prophets were radical monotheists. Jesus was a radical monotheist. Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John were radical monotheists. We bring deep confusion into Christian recovery if we do not see the thread of radical monotheism that unites all these luminaries. Though the expressions of these signal figures were limited by their times, this does not change the fact that radical monotheism is a common thread that unites them. And radical monotheism is the thread that unites these ancient witnesses with contemporary women and men who are dedicating their lives to the radical monotheistic cause in world history today.

The center of value that Niebuhr calls “radical monotheism” has been and still is a gift that is being carried by Western culture. Judaism began a sophisticated discussion of radical monotheism; Christianity and Islam, at their best, were a continuation of this loyalty, commitment, and discussion. All three of these Western religions have also spawned perversions of radical monotheism – usually in the direction of making an old witness to radical monotheism into a doctrinal possession with which to discredit and perhaps oppress other religions and cultures.

Furthermore, radical monotheism is not synonymous with practicing Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Even though the term “radical monotheism” may not appear in many nonwestern religions, radical monotheism is present almost everywhere as a lived center of value. When Hindus claim that all gods and goddesses are just expressions of one overall Beingness, that has an almost identical meaning with saying “There are no gods save Allah.” A clear Hindu knows that the gods and goddesses they employ in their devotions are not the ultimate. Hindu practice, at its best, is a

loyalty to the Oneness of Truth. And a clear Muslim knows that many centers of value exist that claim their relative loyalty, but these many centers of value are not “gods” for Islam – that is, they are not ultimate for the living of human life. The moods of Hinduism and Islam are vastly different, but their depth realizations can be seen as profoundly overlapping. The “Tao” of ancient China is another symbol for loyalty to that basic center of value that we are naming “radical monotheism.” Elements of loyalty to the radical monotheistic center of value are present in almost every religion and in almost every region of the planet. The heritage of the Great Goddess, whose roots reach back at least 25,000 years, was viewed as a great womb that birthed all things and a great tomb who received them home. Humans were fed and nurtured at her breasts. Loyalty to the meaning of this symbol surely functioned for many as a symbol for the same basic loyalty as the “radical monotheism” that H. Richard Niebuhr defined.

I will maintain that “radical monotheism,” as I (with help from H. Richard Niebuhr) am defining it here, is a universally present attitude open to all humans. In the next chapter I will explore how the basic attitude of radical monotheism can become the beginning point or foundation for our specific and practical ethical thinking.