

# Session 10: The Ethics of Radical Monotheism

a realistic critique of futile multiplicity and fanatic unity

People typically think of monotheism as an idea or belief—almost never as a mode of action or ethics. “Radical monotheism,” as elaborated by H. Richard Niebuhr, has to do with a basic center of value and a fundamental ethics.<sup>1</sup> The core question to which “radical monotheism gives answer 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? In his book *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr inspired me to see monotheism as a universal basis for responsible action, an ethics that is not merely Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, but an ethics that applies to any community (religious or otherwise).

“Radical monotheism,” as defined by Niebuhr, is one of three prominent answers that humanity has 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, and they apply to every human life and every society, past or future.

## Contemporary Theism

For Niebuhr “theism” in the terms “polytheism,” “henotheism,” and “monotheism” does not mean belief in gods or goddesses, or in a supreme being (God) 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. The gods and goddesses point to real powers in our lives, but as mythic stories, they are artistic creations of the human mind.

Similarly, Niebuhr’s 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 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. When radical monotheism is our core devotion, it relativizes all our other devotions. These devotions can remain

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

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 the 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 the 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 Infinite 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.

### **Polytheism as Ethics**

As an answer to the question of value and ethics, “polytheism” means having many centers of value, a pantheon of loyalties for my life or for our lives as a social group. Those many centers of value might include: family, work, sex, pleasure, money, self esteem, companionship, approval, power, status, variations on these, and many more centers of value. All of us tend to begin our living dedicated to this poly-loyalty arrangement of choosing our course in life. Indeed, we all have many or most of these centers of value. We bow our knee to whatever symbols or powers may reward us in relation to such values. Eventually, the tragedy of having multiple centers of value begins to be felt. We discover that these various centers of value fight with each other. Both family and job can each seem to demand our whole lives. Our one life can seem torn between the two. Our dedications to both pleasure and work may also tear us in two. These many centers of value each fight for an ultimate claim upon our time and energy. Furthermore, we begin to experience the sad truth that each of these centers of value can and will let us down. Our dearest friend or lover can leave us. Family can die or despise us. Our job can disappear or turn sour. Forms of pleasure can simply end forever. All these meaning-givers or centers of value in our polytheistic pantheon of values can enter the twilight of no longer functioning as meaning-givers that we can trust. So, here are the weaknesses of a polytheistic ethics: (1) the many meaning-givers war with each other, and (2) they each let us down.

## **Henotheism as Ethics**

Henotheism is a partial answer to the weakness of the polytheistic scatteredness. Henotheism builds a pantheon of wholeness for the many gods. To the core question of value and ethics, henotheism provides a unifying cause or value that gives an overall unity and dependability within which all our other values can take a relative place. This typically means a human culture, an overall social arrangement that arranges the many values in relation to something more inclusive. This usually means choosing to identify with a common culture or a limited peer group as the overarching meaning of our living and action. Religious in-groups can easily manifest this henotheistic quality. Members bow their ultimate trust to the religious group rather than to the various gods or goddesses that the group may honor. In modern times, patriotism to a nation has been given henotheistic standing—"my nation right or wrong"—"my nation is the greatest on Earth"—"being a patriot of my nation is the to-live-for-and-to-die-for value that gives unity to my life." Such serious nationalism often includes believing that my view of being a patriot is true for all the other members of my nation: I view them as subversive if they disagree with me about my view of the nation I treasure.

Henotheism can also take the form of making my racial group or my sub-culture as my overarching center of value, identity and action. Finding a group membership that makes my life worthwhile is a strong draw, even if it includes contempt and perhaps 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, taken alone, can exclude the value of other species and include an oppressive relationship with the entire natural planet. Finally, henotheism can be expanded to include all living forms, yet even this center of value is 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 radical monotheism in that it opts for a range of values that is less than the Whole of what is Real.

## **Radical Monotheism as Ethics**

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 realities 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, an enigma beyond understanding by any human mind.

It is often the case that monotheism degenerates into a set of ideas that are used to make sense of things, whereas radical monotheism means a commitment to THAT GRAND NONSENSE that never makes complete sense to our fragile minds. Monotheism has often degenerated into the belief that my group and its beliefs are the super-blessed, or perhaps the one-and-only truth holders. That sort of “belief in one God” is henotheism, not radical 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 license that substitutes for our deep freedom. Radical monotheism includes the release within human beings of these profound essential qualities: trust in Reality, compassion for all, and deep freedom from egoism, social conditioning, and fatalism.

Loyalty to my self-constructed self-image is a loyalty that must be drastically demoted when service of the One overarching Reality is one’s life devotion. Polytheism, on the other hand, does not require a break with egoism. Polytheism is a form of egoism, for the polytheist trips from one source of ego enhancement to another, to another, to another, to still another. Each of the gods or goddesses of the polytheistic ethics is actually some aspect of human life viewed as a power for the enhancement of my ego. Henotheistic devotions are similar. My devotion to my nation is actually a devotion to my view of my nation as an aspect of “me.” Even my devotion to humanity as a center of value is a devotion to me as a human. Radical monotheism also has a view of what is human, profoundly human, namely devotion to the Whole of Reality – only that is profound humanness. We see the call for this total sacrifice of egoism in the well-known line of Jesus, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.” These words means that the cravings for ego promotion are given up in order to affirm Reality and radical realism as the best-case scenario for my life. This radical scenario is viewed as true humanness in the context of radical monotheism. So, radical monotheism is not the same as humanism, even though radical monotheism does result in a thoroughgoing affirmation of humanity along with frogs and rocks, mountains and oceans. As one obtuse example, persons of a monotheistic perspective would not favor destroying all the spiders on the planet to save a few human lives.

## **Radical Monotheism and Science**

Natural science is a method of approaching 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, and 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 the truth of Reality and, therefore, compatible with radical monotheism. Yet the specific results of science can be “idols” that radical monotheism opposes when they are substituted for 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. 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—indeed, 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 by Reality illustrates 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 use of huge atom-smashing cyclotrons for exploring 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 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. As a scientific test for truth, subjectivity is

purposefully and faithfully avoided in the scientific approach to truth. This is both the grandeur of science and its limitation. It cannot explore directly the nature of our consciousness. All exploration of consciousness is explored by a conscious human who is 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 values that relativizes every limited center of value and lives from this ultimately inclusive center of value: the real is the good and the good is the real. This does not mean that our oppressive social patterns must be tolerated, it means that our social change actions must begin with the situations we have and the real possibilities contained in those situations. Realistic living is not a recipe for conservatism; it is recognition that the Real includes possibilities that can be realized with proper effort, as well as the obvious truth that the Real is our current situations that provide our unavoidable beginning points for action. Realistic living does not mean imposing our ideals upon reality. Rather, realism means being willing to make our choices within our real lives and in response to the real challenges that we confront.

Radical monotheism affirms that everything scientific work discovers to be real is good, and that everything contemplative inquiry discovers to be real is good. And, a radical monotheism loyalty includes the challenge 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 justice as a consequence of their radical monotheism. The ethics of radical monotheism drives toward justice: it opens to us the need to serve all people and all values rather than the values of our narrow group and its preferences and delusions.

As finite religions in real world history, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also carry perversions of radical monotheism—most often these perversions take the form of a

henotheistic “worship” of the dogma and morality of particular religious groups. This decay of radical monotheism into an in-group self-worship is a temptation faced by every religious and secular group. Such reductionism of the Real 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 upon the planet. This reductionism of the Real is the root attitude beneath all human and ecological oppression. When radical monotheism is our center of value, the ethical sphere is broken open for perpetual creativity toward ever-fresh inventions of justice.

## **Radical Monotheism and Religion**

Every religion is a finite construction created by human beings. At its best, religion does nothing more than point 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 that ever-surprising Mysterious Reality; therefore radical monotheism cannot be contained within any religious forms—dogmas, moralities, or communal structures and processes.

For example, Christianity as a historical community of religions has now 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 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 the Islamic 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 that 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 clarified for us.

I will maintain that “radical monotheism,” as I (with help from H. Richard Niebuhr) am defining it here, is a universally present ethical attitude that is available to all humans who have been made aware of their reduced loyalties and are willing to be open to the inclusive Reality in which we are all embedded.

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