

God against the Gods: Monotheism versus Polytheism

Dr. Madan Lal Goel

Professor Emeritus of Political Science

University of West Florida

The topic of “God against the Gods” originated with Jonathan Kirsch’s book of the same title. “God against the Gods” refers to the war between Monotheism and Polytheism through history. Ram Swarup’s *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam* (1992) also contributed to this essay.

I will briefly describe first the rise of Christianity in the West and the consequent blood-letting against heretics and pagans that followed. The West has changed dramatically and is now pluralistic in religious ethos. The banner of monotheism was picked up with renewed vigor in Islam. The challenge of radical Islam is discussed in second half of the essay. I conclude with the hope that extremism, no matter from which tradition it springs forth, will be defeated. Here I draw on the optimistic vision of Sri Aurobindo.

1. Man is a worshipping animal. From the earliest times, man has turned to a higher power for salvation and support. Something deep in human psyche impels us to offer reverence to a power greater than ourselves. The idea of God is literally hard-wired into human anatomy. Homo sapiens are also Homo religious.
2. Scores of religious systems have existed through history. Only a few survive the long stretches of time. Among the major world religions today are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and several earth-based native traditions. Smaller religions include Jainism, Sikhism, Baha’ism, Mormonism and numerous tribal religions. India and Israel are two centers or cradles of religion: (a) India is the home to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism; (b) Israel is the home to Judaism and Christianity. Islam was born in Arabia and received much influence from Judaism and Christianity.
3. Nothing in human nature impels us to offer worship to only a single god. Throughout history, human beings have worshipped numerous gods, goddesses, angels and divine beings. The worship of a single supreme deity is a later development. Monotheism is said to originate with the Jews. Jews in fact may have borrowed the idea during their captivity in Egypt. The Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton ordained the worship of one god to the exclusion of all others in 14th century bce. History shows that Akhenaton did not succeed. Common people loved their many gods.
4. Monotheism took root in the land of Israel. Jews however were not fanatic about monotheism. Jews worshipped one god, but they did not deny that other people had their own gods. Jewish monotheism did not lead to holy wars, Crusades or Jihads. The Jewish prophets repeatedly spoke against idolatry and polytheism, suggesting that many Jews continued to worship a plurality of gods.
5. Aggressive monotheism begins with Christian zealots. The zealots called themselves ‘the soldiers of Christ’. They were willing to die for their beliefs. The Church history gives many accounts of martyrdom. Monotheistic Christianity became the state religion under Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. The Roman Empire was a totalitarian state. It could enforce its

edicts with the aid of spies, torturers and executioners. The monotheistic experiment almost ended with the death of Emperor Constantine. We are told that Constantine's nephew, Emperor Julian tried to restore the old order and bring back the worship of many gods. But he died only two years after taking office. In Christian history, Julian is commonly identified as "an Apostate"-- a term of abuse.

6. Much has changed in the Christian world in the recent decades. Julian may not be dead after all. Many people in Europe are de-Christianized. A multiplicity of viewpoints prevails; a plurality of gods is worshipped. A 2008 article in *Time Magazine* reports that more people in France say they are Buddhist than Protestant or Jewish (March 31, 2008, article by Pico Iyer). Today the flag of Monotheism is carried high only by Islamists.
7. Monotheism insists that only a single God exists, known variously as Yahweh, the Lord or Allah. Other gods are "false" or even demonic. The monotheistic God is jealous and wrathful. There is one God, and one correct method of worship. Those who deviate are heretics and may be punished, tortured or killed. Polytheism in contrast is open-ended and easy going. Many roads lead to the mountain top. A person may choose any path. Violence among polytheists is not unknown, for example the conflict between the followers of Vishnu and Shiva in India, but it pales in comparison with monotheists. Jonathan Kirsch writes:

"At the heart of polytheism is an open-minded and easygoing approach to religious belief and practice, a willingness to entertain the idea that there are many gods and many ways to worship them. At the heart of monotheism, by contrast, is the sure conviction that only a single god exists, a tendency to regard one's own rituals and practices as the only proper way to worship the one true god." See, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism*, Viking Compass, 2006, P 2.

8. In its exclusive devotion to the worship of one God, monotheism has inspired much ferocity and fanaticism. The infamous Inquisition lasted 400 years, 1200s—1600s and engulfed all of Europe. The Spanish and the Portuguese inquisitions in the 16th century were especially gruesome. The Church appointed Control Boards to root out heresy got carried away. Many were tortured, flogged and burned on mere suspicion or heresy. Inquisition was used against Protestants, former Jews and pagans. For merely talking with animals or for being alone in the woods, women could be charged for the crime of witchcraft. Several million women were tortured and burned at the stake. Many converted Jews, including their children and grandchildren (called "Conversos"), were tortured and burned for their lack of Christian zeal.
9. Then there was the Thirty-Year War, 1618 to 1648. Protestant and Catholic countries fought each other with much brutality and bloodshed. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 brought an end to religious wars. It also brought forth the modern state system. Religion and state were separated. Gradually religion became a private affair. Secularism took birth as a practical necessity. Europe could not otherwise survive as a civilization. The Islamic world faces a similar civilizational dilemma—to reform or to commit suicide in constant warfare.

Christianity Reformed: Christianity has been reformed in the past several centuries. It has become pluralistic and multifaceted. Instead of one Church headed by the Pope, there are three:

Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox. In addition, there are smaller sects: Coptic Christians, Armenian Christians, Syrian Christians (in India), Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Moonies, and several others. Protestants are divided among some 20 separate denominations: Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc, etc.

Many devout Christians believe in their God with total devotion and intensity, and yet reject violence. Jesus' loving death on the cross offers to them a model of supreme sacrifice, not hegemony. America continues to be a Mecca of religious pluralism.

Islam: All however is not well with the world. We were reminded once again about the ferocity unleashed by monotheism on 9/11.

“The men who hijacked and crashed four civilian airliners were inspired to sacrifice their own lives, and to take the lives of several thousand ‘infidels,’ because they had embraced the simple but terrifying logic that lies at the heart of monotheism: if there is only one god, if there is only one right way to worship that god, then there is only one fitting punishment for failing to do so—death.” Jonathan Kirsch, *op.cit.* P 2.

The ancient hatreds born of religion have been picked up by Muslims in contemporary society. The Islamic world is torn apart by religious violence. Samuel Huntington of Harvard wrote on “the clash of civilizations” thesis several years ago. Radical Islam is at war with every other religion and civilization. Militant Islamic anger is directed against Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Slavs, moderate Islamic regimes and animists. Militant Islam is in ferment. The Islamic world has “bloody borders.” Why is this so? The explanation may lie in Islamic theology and Islamic history.

Islamic Theology

Islamic militancy arises out of its monotheistic theology. There is no other God but Allah (*la ilaha il Allah*). Islamic God is jealous. He brooks no rivals. He claims sole sovereignty. He proclaims Jihad or Holy War on unbelievers, *kafirs*. Prophet Mohammad is regarded as the final and the seal of prophets (*wanna Muhammad rasul Allah*). Lesser prophets such as Isaiah, Moses and Jesus are recognized as precursors but Mohammad is the most perfect. Like Christians, Muslims also believe in a single life, a single judgment and eternal life either in heaven or hell.

Ram Swarup, an Indian student of religion, says that this theology of a single God, a single prophet, a single revelation, a single church or *ummah*, a single life and a single judgment leads invariably to intolerance. See his *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam*, Delhi, 1992.

Islamic History

Islam may be dated to 610 AD, when Moharnmad began having conversations with Archangel Gabriel. Mohammad's message one true God or Allah attracted a number of followers. But the leaders of Mecca rejected his new teaching. Conflict ensued. In 622, Mohammad was forced to flee to Medina, some 240 miles to the North. The year of the flight, 622 AD, is significant as it marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Mohammad became the leader of Medina and within a few years felt emboldened to raid Meccan caravans. Mohammad's actions were brilliant and bold. Mecca signed a treaty of friendship and allowed Muslims to enter the city for pilgrimage. Two years later the Prophet captured Mecca in a

courageous move. He was now an unchallenged leader. By the time Mohammad died in 632 AD at age 62, he had become the supreme figure in all of Arabia.

Muslim raids did not stop with the death of Mohammad. Within two years, the holy warriors attacked and conquered Byzantium and Persia, the two powerful empires of the period. Dreams of acquiring fabulous wealth as well as religious zeal produced marvelous results. It seemed that, armed with faith in Allah, nothing could stop the soldiers of Islam. In 712, Arabs captured Sindh on the frontiers of India. In 715 they reached Spain after conquering North Africa.

In less than 100 years since Mohammad's death, the Islamic rule stretched from the frontiers of India all the way to Spain. Victories resumed after a hiatus of three centuries. Believers captured Anatolia (Turkey) in 1071, the throne of Delhi in 1201, and Constantinople in 1453. Islam's rapid rise from insignificance to dominion had a touch of the miraculous for Muslims. The fabulous military victories demonstrated to the faithful God's pleasure with Islam and punishment for the infidel.

The Islamic Conquest of India: Islamic expansion in India lasted some 700 years, roughly from 1000 to 1700 AD. The expansion was a bloody affair. In the year 1,000, Mahmud Gaznavi, a devout Muslim, descended on the plains of North India like a typhoon, pillaging and massacring on his way. Alberuni, the Islamic scholar who accompanied Mahmud to India, writes:

Mathura, the holy city of Krishna, was the next victim. In the middle of the city there was a temple larger and finer than the rest, which can neither be described nor painted. The Sultan was of the opinion that 200 years would have been required to build it. The idols included 'five of red gold, each five yards high,' with eyes formed of priceless jewels.

The Sultan gave orders that all the temples should be burnt with naphtha and fire, and leveled with the ground. Thus perished works of art which must have been among the noblest monuments of ancient India.

At the destruction of another famous temple, Somnath, it is said that 50,000 were massacred. The Sultan also acquired a fabulous booty of gold, women and children, divided among soldiers according to Muslim war tradition: the Sultan claiming the royal fifth, the cavalry man getting twice as much as the foot soldier.

Near East and the Balkans: The Islamic conquest of the Near East and the Balkans is a similar tale of woe. The Egyptian born historian Bat Ye'or provides a gripping account of destruction in her books (see the reading list). Christianity and Judaism were the dominant religions in the Near East and the Balkan region before the advent of Islam.

Ralph Borsodi, an American social scientist observed that except in the Middle East, everywhere the two Semitic religions of Christianity and Islam are intruders and impositions. In Europe Christianity is an imposition, in Asia Islam is. Indigenous Europe is Celtic and Pagan. Indigenous Asia is Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucianist.

The Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul observes:

Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's world view alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries, there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil. See his, *Beyond Belief*, Random House, 1998, p xi.

Millions of ordinary Muslims are normal, peace-loving people. They simply wish to live in harmony with their neighbors. We have known such neighbors. The extremists have brought bad name to all Muslims.

Social and Economic Explanations

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes social and economic factors to explain Islamic violence. Poverty and illiteracy are said to breed militancy. But these explanations fail. Poor societies are not the hotbed of extremism. Bangladesh is not the major source of Jihadist ideology. Osama bin-Laden was a millionaire. His second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri is a medical graduate. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudis. The fiery TV preacher Anwar al-Awlaki held three degrees from American universities.

In the name of political correctness, leading scholars refuse to pass any judgment on extremism. The official version of history is written thus: the radicals have high jacked a great religion, a religion of peace. Islamic ideology therefore requires little examination. We patronize Islam when we say that it has no serious problems. We mislead ourselves by repeating the mantra that the problem with Islam is a few Osama bin-Ladens.

The existence of Israel is also cited as reasons for Islamic militancy. But Islamic radical ideology predates the founding of Israel.

Three Caveats

1. The mystical Sufi branch of Islam does not subscribe to many of the extremist dictums listed in this essay. Sufism is a smaller branch within Islam. It has similarity with Hindu Vedanta and Greek Gnostic thought. The record of Sufis in India is mixed. Some Sufi saints were loved by the people, Hindu and Muslim. Other Sufis marched with the invading Muslim armies and supported and even encouraged the massacre of Kafirs.
2. Millions of ordinary Muslims are not consumed with religious passion. Simply, they wish to live in harmony with their neighbors. They often suffer because of the passions let lose by radical clerics.
3. Religious fundamentalism to a lesser or greater degree affects all major religions in the 21st century, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Islamic fundamentalism is a breed apart. It is more widespread and has deeper pockets. Its aims are global.

The Future

The 20th century combated a number of totalitarian ideologies: Imperialism, Fascism, Nazism and Communism. Liberal scholars were at the forefront of these battles. The rise of radical Islam is a new challenge. The first thing necessary is to open up radical Islamic doctrine to examination. This is the task of intelligentsia, especially those in the Islamic world. Once this is done, the rest will be easy. Closed ideologies masquerading as religion will fall of their own weight once the light is shone on them.

The future is not altogether gloomy. There is hope. Creedal religions are on the decline.

More and more people are now 'seekers' rather than 'believers'. The West leads the way, as in many other things. Spirituality is finding a new home in the West. "More French people call themselves Buddhist than Protestant or Jew" (Pico Iyer in *Time Magazine*, March 31, 2008, 45-53). New York City has 40 Tibetan Buddhist centers in 2013, up from 2 in 1968.

Some 25 percent of the American public describe themselves as "spiritual, not religious." In early 2008, Oprah Winfrey interviewed Eckhart Tolle on her popular show. Some 10 million people watched the webcasts. Tolle is a New Thought teacher. See his, *A New Earth: Awakening to your Life's Purpose*, 2005. Tolle's teachings are derived from Zen Buddhism and Hindu Vedanta: we are not the body, or the mind or the emotions. We are the ever present awareness within, the ever-present Consciousness. To the extent we live in the ever-present Consciousness, to that extent we are free. As the Consciousness is one, we all are united, members of a single family. Differences are driven by religious ideology, not spirituality.

A spiritual transformation is happening all around us. It is our hope that the revolution will encompass all humanity, including the Middle East. The attempts at human unification through the Internet, the telephone and the Jet travel are the initial signs of something new. Man will exceed himself, said Sri Aurobindo, the Indian philosopher and mystic. A new consciousness will dawn upon humanity. He labored spiritually for this to happen. Change is coming upon us in society, politics and religion. Evidence is not lacking. Sri Aurobindo penned these immortal lines in his epic poem, *Savitri*.

The Sacred Birth

In matter shall be lit the spirit's glow,
In body and body kindled the sacred birth;
Night shall awake to the anthem of stars,
The days become a happy pilgrim march,
Our will a force of the Eternal's power,
And thought the rays of a spiritual sun.

A few shall see what none yet understands;
God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep;
For man shall not know the coming till its hour
And belief shall be not till the work is done.

Reading List:

Jonathan Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism*, Viking Compass, 2006.

V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief*, Random House, 1998.

Ram Swarup's *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam*, Voice of India, 1992.

Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to your Life's Purpose*, Dutton, 2005.

Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: from Jihad to Dhimmitude*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996.