

## Contemplation and monotheism: On the indispensability of irrelevance

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What I would like to do today is to honour my compatriot, Julian of Norwich, by attempting to boost something which was dear to her heart: contemplation. I want to do this by taking a long way round to indicate that monotheism without contemplation is dangerous, and to ponder why this should be so. To put it in a nutshell, my claim is that monotheism is a terrible idea, but a wonderful discovery. So I am going to ask you to bear with me as I attempt to fly a series of kites with you, and see if, when they are all up there, we can make any sense of them.

Here is my first kite. My first kite is a claim that there isn't really any such thing as monotheism. By this I mean that the notion of monotheism is a deeply unstable one, such that it is not at all clear what we mean when we talk about it. Let me explain: normally monotheism is taken to be opposed to polytheism. It is the claim that there is one God alone, as opposed to many gods. Monotheism is different in this sense from so-called "henotheism" which is the claim that while there may be many gods, one should stick to only one of them. In this sense the Commandment "I am the Lord thy God...thou shalt have no other gods before me"<sup>1</sup> is a *henotheistic* commandment, not a monotheistic one. In other words, it presupposes many gods and merely claims that one should stick with this one. In our standard account of the birth of Jewish monotheism, which I will be revisiting later, the key monuments are those passages of Deutero-Isaiah, written after Cyrus' cylinder promulgated the return from exile in Babylon, which clearly indicate "I am the Lord, there is no other"<sup>2</sup>. In other words, there just aren't any other gods, there is only one God.

Well, here is where we hit our first bit of instability. What is meant by the "one" in mono-theism? Does it mean "one" as opposed to two, three, or seventy nine? In which case it is one as a number, and is opposed to other numbers. In that case, since whenever we define something over against something, it is true to say that it is much more like that thing than it is unlike it, "one" God is merely a uniquely big, powerful, and somewhat lonely member of the series "gods" all of whose other members have been declared inexistant.

But there is another use of the word "one", which is not properly speaking a numerical use at all. This is where "one God" is opposed to "nothing". In other words, where "One" is more like the exclamation "is!" than it is like a number. The exclamation "is!" is opposed to "nothing there!". Now just as the number "one" is more like the other numbers that it is scrubbing out than it is different from them, so the "one God" as opposed to "nothing at all" is more like the "nothing at all" that it is opposed to than it is to anything else. In other words, following this understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 20, 2,3; Dt 5, 6,7

<sup>2</sup> Is 45, 18d

the “mono” in “monotheism”, God is much more like “nothing at all” than like “one of the gods”.

And this, of course, is part of the genius of monotheistic Judaism: the realisation that “one God” is much more like “no god at all” than like “one of the gods”. In other words that atheism, which is untrue, offers a much less inadequate picture of God than theism, which is true. For monotheistic Judaism, as for monotheistic Catholicism, which I take to be universal Judaism, the principal temptation is not atheism, but idolatry.

My second kite which I would like to fly concerns what follows from this: the danger of monotheism. Briefly put, my thesis is, as I indicated, that monotheism is a terrible idea, but a wonderful discovery. Let me explain: You cannot really have an idea about something that is more like nothing at all than it is like anything that is. I mean, what is it like to have an idea about nothing at all? So when we have an idea about monotheism, our idea tends to latch on to the notion of one as opposed to many, or one opposed to none, rather as if none were simply another number, but a number of a frighteningly negative or absent sort. In other words, inseparable from our notion of “oneness” is the “as opposed to” bit. And this, dare I say it, is where things get dangerous. Because if there is a God who is not one of the gods, who is not on the same level as anything else at all, then of course it is true to say that there can be no “as opposed to” in God. Or in other words, there is no rivalry at all between God and anything that is. Which means that whenever in any of our thinking about God we have an “as opposed to”, however residual, that same “as opposed to” reduces God to some sort of “god” and that same “as opposed to” will immediately have sociological consequences.

Let us take a look at a fairly standard sociological description of the big monotheistic religions (and nowadays, as a brief glance at the publishers’ advertisements in the New York Review of Books will confirm, we are fairly inundated with such descriptions).

I suppose that it is a typical representation able to be found within all three major monotheistic cultures, the Jewish, the Christian and the Islamic that the One True God has delivered a message: Torah, Torah interpreted by New Testament, or Koran. The message, it too, is one and true, and the written message is guaranteed by the one true and definitive messenger: Moses, Jesus or Mohammed. I don’t wish to say that this is the true structure of each of the monotheistic cultures in question, merely that under certain circumstances, adherents of each religious culture can behave as if this were the structure of their “religion”. While these adherents may at times be thought extreme by other members of the group, it is common for other members of the group to be frightened of suggesting that these adherents are not basically right.

It appears to be true that the same structure can repeat itself within each of those groups thereafter: “we” are the people who have received the message from the one true God, and live under it, and the way we live under it is to recreate the uniqueness of God by developing a strong sense of what is other than us – gentiles in the case of Jews, the unbaptised “world” in the case of Christians, and infidels who aren’t members of the Ummah in the case of Moslems. In other words, we become an extension of the “I” of the one God whose message we have received, and our job is

to bring others to obedience from their otherness (often an otherness which is either wicked, or impure, or both), or at the very least to keep high the difference between us and those others and encourage fervour in resisting assimilation to those others when they are more powerful than us.

Now what I would like to claim is that in such an understanding of monotheism, “God” and his “messenger” are effectively a function of the group since what they do is guarantee a group’s cohesiveness by providing a rallying point, something totemic, around which people can gather and which gives them a strong sense of rightness in being able to interpret the message over against the wicked “other”. Now please notice what this means. It means in fact that there is no real “other” in the story at all. God and his messenger merely act to reinforce the creation of “another” over against which “we” can feel united, blessed by God and so on. And this means that the “other” is merely a function of “we”, and is in fact a necessary part of the “we”, as its flip side, its dark side. If there were suddenly no “other” then “we” would disintegrate, would fall into *anomie*, become meaningless.

A typical way of countering just such an imputation of functional atheism to this sort of monotheism would be to say: “but the message itself is the sign of a real other, “Another other” if you like, who is not part of the “we”, having spoken to us and given us another perspective by which we are right to be building ourselves up in this way: it is what we are commanded to do”. The trouble with this is that it doesn’t resist the discovery that interpretation is everything. A message, and a messenger to guarantee it, are simply tokens except in as far as they are kept alive by the group interpreting both the message and the messenger. This means, in other words, that a written message and a guaranteeing messenger are, in themselves, of no worth in maintaining an authentic “otherness” of voice to the group in question, since it is only as the group interprets them that they have continued life in the group at all. And that means that it is the group interpretation which is the only place where the presence of the “other other” might be found if there were such a presence. But wherever the group interpretation tends to work by creating a “we” at the expense of, over against, a necessary “they”, we have reason to doubt that anything is present other than the spirit of group building over against another, which is, of course, what is meant by functional atheism. It is where, whatever claims are made about a divinity, the only detectable real “other” involved is the social other over against which the “we” is built, and which is in fact merely a function of the “we”.

In case that was a bit dense, let me offer an example or two of what I mean: One of the strongest ways of maintaining the unity of the one group loyal to its one God is to be able to detect and proclaim ways in which the group is being victimised. Thus, typically leaders in a monotheistic group, or their surrogates and spokespersons, will identify ways in which the wicked “they” is making life impossible for the true believers, thus rallying people around their interpretation of what makes the group whole and pure. Of course, this need to present the group as victim can be helped by people who are in fact oppressing some members of the group in question. After all, just because I’m paranoid doesn’t mean that there aren’t people who are out to get me. Nevertheless, it takes a special sort of genius to be able to convince the group of believers that it is themselves *as group of believers* that are the target of the evil intentions of the other.

In this sense Osama bin Laden was being brilliant as a revivifier of Islam when he managed to convince people that it was *as Moslems* that they were being oppressed and exploited by the wicked west and the United States in particular. By bombing the Twin Trade Towers in Manhattan, he also managed to provoke a backlash which fed beautifully into his interpretation, thus convincing people, including some of those promoting the backlash from the American side, that this really was a crusade against Islam. It remains to be seen whether the identical tactic being used by some evangelical groups in the States (and even some of their Catholic imitators) when they attack proposed or existing gay rights legislation as being a preparation for persecuting evangelical Christians for their “Bible-based beliefs”, can be equally successful in promoting evangelical unity and fervour through a sense of being victimised. It also remains to be seen how far certain defenders of the current Catholic ecclesiastical system in the United States can go in portraying the ongoing scandal concerning systemic clerical ineptitude in dealing with pedophilia as the result of deep atavistic anti-Catholicism, or a Jewish conspiracy to discredit one of the voices that stands up for Palestine, or simply well-orchestrated financial greed, thus attempting to rally round Catholic supporters to the defense of the current ecclesiastical status quo.

What is in common in the case of each of these depictions of a unique group being harassed for its uniquely true beliefs in the midst of a perverted and evil world is that each is monotheistic, and yet that the responses I have described are entirely without faith. I imagine that at the same time as Osama bin Laden offers his metanarrative of an evil “they” who must be resisted by the good, there are many Moslem believers who hold their heads in shame, for they know that if God really is true, then to exaggerate the strength of the wicked other so as to strengthen the faith of the believer is the worst sort of nihilistic atheism, because it really does suppose that, in practice, it is only by provoking the wicked other to act out his part in the drama that our faith will survive, which means that we don’t believe in God, but only in conflict. For if God really is true, then appearances are deceptive, and what look like wicked conspiracies by the wicked other are much exaggerated, because God is much stronger than they.

Likewise, I imagine that there are Evangelical Christians who hang their heads in shame when they see their religion being turned into something dependent on a necessary enemy, as though gay people, evil though we may be, could really be such a threat to the order and stability of the Creator of all things, and as though the Gospel message really could be reduced to “thou shalt hate gay people, and having made sure of that, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”. And finally, I imagine that there are not a few Catholic Bishops who hang their heads in shame when they see confrères and apologists who seem quite incapable of any sort of systemic self-criticism, and indeed flee from such a painful possibility by new attempts to point towards wicked others, within and without.

Well, having attempted to show that monotheism doesn’t really exist as a stable reality, and that much of what passes as monotheism in a typical sociological understanding is not really theistic at all, but functionally atheistic, I would like to fly my third kite. This is to begin to explore the positive side of things. Having claimed that monotheism is a terrible idea, I do hope to show that it is a wonderful discovery. But part of this claim, which I will stress continually, is that it is only as a discovery,

and in the degree to which it remains a discovery, that monotheism is wonderful. Whenever it shifts status from discovery to idea, then it becomes terrible.

To approach this I would like to revisit the standard account of the emergence of monotheism (moving beyond henotheism) during the period of and immediately after the Babylonian exile. The standard account goes something like this (and I have often used versions of it myself). The Jewish exiles in Babylon were faced with one of two possibilities: either Yahweh and Marduk were competing deities, in which case Marduk was clearly superior, and Yahweh a defeated deity. In that case, it would have made sense to go along with the winning deity and become worshippers of Marduk. Or, on the other hand, Marduk was no deity at all, but was simply a function of Babylonian power and group building, and Yahweh was the only God who was for some reason allowing his people to go through this phase of being conquered and enslaved. But if this latter account were the case, then Yahweh was not in opposition to any god at all, because there are no gods, Yahweh is simply God who brings things into being, and is perfectly capable of using the power and structures of other empires for his own purposes. The literary monument to this breakthrough as it is being made is to be found in Deutero-Isaiah where we get the first uncompromising statements of monotheism as opposed to henotheism.

Well, so far so good. But this account, one which as I say, I have often used before, in which the Yahwist believers detect the functional atheism of the Babylonian pantheon and are pushed by their own extreme precariousness into making a sort of pole vault into higher ground, a sort of theological “*aut Caesar, aut nihil*”, - this account is open, I think to the accusation that it is part of the same functionally atheistic, or sociological explanation of the emergence of monotheism. After all, it could be said to be nothing other than a particularly thoroughgoing and complete reaction to Babylonian religion – an example of a particularly triumphant *ressentiment*, as completely triumphant in fact as the completeness of the defeat which led to it. In other words, what I have begun to suspect is that this account is itself far too sociological an account of the emergence of monotheism.

With this in mind I would like to propose something rather different. And this is something rather odd – it is a theological account of the emergence of monotheism. In other words, monotheism as discovery. And this is where, as far as I can see, the typical sociological account of, and discussion about, monotheism falls down. In order to talk about this, let me indicate what I take to be a fairly safe understanding of the chronology of some of the writings in the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>3</sup>. I take it that there was at some stage in the distant past a book called The Book of The 12 Prophets. This book was composed of twelve fairly short prophetic books, starting with Amos and Hosea, who are the earliest prophets of whom we have written evidence. In an earlier form than we have it, Isaiah of Jerusalem was probably a short book like the twelve, which we now call the “minor prophets” and it is probable that the chapters 7-12 of our current Isaiah formed the nucleus of that earlier book. The early Isaiah seems to have prophesied in the period between about 730 and 700 BC, in other words during

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<sup>3</sup> For my understanding of the debates concerning the chronology of the Hebrew Scriptures I am reliant on the extraordinary work of Padre Caetano Minette de Tillesse. His *Revista Bíblica Brasileira* published out of Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil is the most accessible guide to the vastly complex and ever shifting world of scholarly criticism of the Hebrew Testament known to me.

the time when the northern kingdom, about which Isaiah, a court prophet of the King of Judah, cared little, came to an end.

What is interesting is that this fairly short “first Isaiah” rather than remaining a short book like those of the prophets Amos and Hosea, gradually grew over the next hundred years or so, as it was re-read in the light of changing circumstances so that when Assyria lost out to Babylon, a re-reading could take place in which the prophecies concerning the former kingdom began to apply to the latter. Further change could be introduced during the reign of Josiah (c. 640) and later the whole thing could be re-read and expanded in the light of the impending doom from the Babylonian conquest, and the exile (maybe with a deuteronomistic editor at work). Finally, it was the author we call Second Isaiah who was able to do a re-reading adding a whole new section after Cyrus’ announcement of the return. And so it was that a few chapters grew and became a much re-worked book of close to thirty nine chapters, and then a longer book of fifty five chapters.

So far as I know there is nothing particularly contentious, or new, in this brief description of the editing process. What I would like to bring out is something for which words like “editing process” become markers which blind by their obviousness. This editing process required people, readers, scribes, a school of Isaiah, call it what you will, to be receiving and understanding something and keeping it alive over a period of something like two hundred years. And that two hundred years includes over one hundred and twenty years before the Babylonian exile.

Furthermore this editing process presupposes people working away at something in which they saw themselves as exercising a continuity such that even the final editor of second Isaiah saw himself as producing the flower of something which had started much, much earlier. In other words, the great, uncompromising monotheism-over-against-nothing-at-all of Second Isaiah was not understood to be a recent bright spark in reaction to Babylon, but the product of a certain sort of faithfulness over time to a wrestling with something which long preceded the Babylonian exile, and indeed the existence of Babylon as a major power.

Now this is where things start to get interesting, because we are talking, in the case of first Isaiah, of a number of statements which presuppose a certain sort of being addressed and a certain experience which went along with a being addressed such that from this “*in nuce*” experience, the possibility of understanding monotheism-over-against-nothing-at-all was born. Let us look at some of these phrases. The first thing the Lord says to Isaiah that he should tell Ahaz the king is this:

Take heed, be quiet, and do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps...<sup>4</sup>

And here the prophet goes on to talk about the threat to Jerusalem posed by the alliance between Syria and Ephraim, vassals of Assyria, the two stumps in question. The prophecy ends:

‘If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Is 7,4a

Now, what I would like to bring out about this prophecy is that it is exactly the reverse of the sort of thing that someone interested in promoting monotheism as functional atheism should be about. It supposes that the fundamental experience of God is one of being able to be at peace and unafraid since God is so much stronger than anything else. And it presupposes that what faith in God looks like is a certain sort of being established, made stable, such that "I" or the group is not moved by the social other at all.

The second prophecy is the famous one about the young maid conceiving and bringing forth a child whose name shall be Immanuel which is familiar to all Christians from our Advent and Christmas readings. Again, the contrast between the realpolitik concerns of Ahaz regarding the defence of his kingdom and the sign offered him could not be greater. By the standards of monotheism as functional atheism, Isaiah's sign is useless. It suggests waiting and watching as something very weak and insignificant is born and grows. A less powerful sign than this could scarcely be imagined, and by the same token, this is a very peculiar pointer to what became the notion of a monotheism over against nothing at all. Because not a competition of powers, rather an indication of a quite different sort of power.

The third prophesy is, if it were possible, even more stunning in what it presupposes. First there is the prophesy of dismay and disarray for the nations:

Be broken, you peoples, and be dismayed; give ear all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed. Take counsel together, but it will come to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us (Immanu-El).<sup>6</sup>

And then there is this, as filling out the picture of the sort of strength of the one speaking. Ganging up together comes to naught, strong promises of leaders will not stand. Instead:

For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble thereon; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken." Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately, along with this picture of nascent monotheism comes the notion that the sort of person who is faced with such incomparable strength has to learn to pay no

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<sup>5</sup> Is 7,9b

<sup>6</sup> Is 8,9-10

<sup>7</sup> Is 8 11-17

attention at all to what people are saying, not to be swayed by what moves them this way and that, and above all not to engage in the sort of group building activities which flourish with conspiracy theories, in other words, group creations of a wicked other. The God who is wholly Other, genuinely “another Other” has no part in such activities; indeed, from the point of view of the functional atheists, those for whom belief is a sort of group-controlled “Gott mit Uns” exercise, the real God is a stumbling block, a scandal, an offence, something they won’t be able to get over because God works in ways exactly opposed to their normal understanding of desire.

Isaiah understands that this message will not be palatable, and had better be confined to disciples who will be able to meditate on it over time. Let me repeat those lines:

Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.

Here it is quite clear that there is no immediate use to this prophecy. The authentically “other Other” cannot be understood, grasped, even listened to now, and the only thing to do with the prophecy is to prepare a group of disciples who will meditate on the testimony, which is to say, the witness borne to what the “other Other” is like, over time. The “waiting”, the “hoping”, the notion of the Lord who is “hiding his face”, and the instruction “not to walk in the way of this people” all indicate that the “other Other” cannot be grasped now, that only time and the alteration of the understanding of the ones listening will enable the nature of the other Other to become available.

Now, I would like to make two points about this, which flow from the same perception and which I think to be simply indispensable to any proper understanding of Judeo-Christian monotheism. In this picture of emerging monotheism, the God who is not one of the Gods, in addition to beginning to emerge long before the Babylonian crisis, emerges *from the onset* as a presence leading to self-criticism. The stunning words of prophecy are of course a way of relativizing the power of the other nations, but they are simultaneously a source of self-criticism of the “we” in whose midst they are pronounced. It is “we” who are not going to be able to “get” it quickly, and thus the prophet and his group have to be prepared for irrelevance because they are not moved by the same fears and concerns arising from the events and struggles of this-worldly power. Hence they are not responding to the same immediate issues, decisions and choices which are being made about them, nor seeking advice from the same sources. In other words, time, contemplation and irrelevance were absolutely indispensable to the discovery of monotheism, because it could only be discovered as part of a self-critical process. And being prepared for irrelevance also means being prepared to lose their reputation as the sort of people who might have interesting, useful or important opinions about what is going on. In fact, a severe despoliation of self-importance is going to be a necessary accompaniment to this process of listening to the emerging self-critical voice.

Should anyone be tempted to say “Oh yes, well that’s just Isaiah”, I’d like to point out that even Amos, the first of the prophets whose voice we have, and who was a prophet of the northern kingdom, that is of Israel rather than of Judah, preaching a few years before Isaiah of Jerusalem, works in exactly the same way. The first two chapters of

Amos consist of a series of quick prophecies against the nations (Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab and Judah) each starting with the formula:

Thus says the Lord “for three transgressions of X and for four I will not revoke the punishment”.

But this is the build up to the real criticism, which is of Israel. Where each of the nations gets a couple of verses of criticism, Israel gets ten, and then from Chapter Three onwards, the blast is directed entirely at the “we”. In other words, strictly contrary to the typical sociological understanding of monotheism as an idea, the emergence of Jewish monotheism appears to begin as a voice which is far tougher on the “we” than on the “they”, and indeed berates the “we” for paying far too much attention to the “they”. This is not what Dr Durkheim ordered.

The second point which I would like to develop from this, and the one which is for me the most important of all these points, is this one. In the functionally atheistic picture of monotheism within group sociology the “we”, or even better the “I” is that of the group, the God is the more or less tokenistic “he” or the “it” which backs up the group and gives it the impetus to keep up its group frontiers against the “they” on which the group is secretly dependent. However, in the picture of emerging Jewish monotheism which I have been attempting to look at, something much stranger seems to be coming about. For in this latter picture, the “I” or the “We” is that of God, and the “other” is the group. In other words, the structure is entirely inverted. The listening group is the “other” whose “we” is being discovered as it sits, over time, under the voice of the “I”.

Now I would like to make, I suppose, the obvious point about this, but one which we find psychologically very difficult. In the Jewish understanding of monotheism it was the “I am” which informed the “God who is more like nothing at all than like anything that is”. In other words that rather than the birth of Jewish monotheism looking like an intellectual discovery of a logical point, it looked much more like the passive sitting under an “I am” coming from nowhere, not in rivalry with anything at all, and undoing the “over against” of the gods. And this, of course, is exactly what the central Yahwistic text, the self-naming of Yahweh, says<sup>8</sup>. Moses is not ordered to go and say to the people of Israel “He” has sent me but “I am” has sent me. And this for a very good reason, only able to be understood over time: “He” would merely be a function of my strong-willed “I”; However, in the Yahwistic picture the “me” who has been sent is but a malleable function of an unutterably strong, and almost unmentionable “I am”.

Now this is the central structure of Jewish and of Christian monotheism, that of an “I am” who is not in any sort of rivalry with anything, who is speaking into the midst of a group which is always a “they” in the first place, and only gradually becomes a “we” as it is able to let go of being a “we-over-against-a-they”. Furthermore, this “I am” is never a function of the group, but always a voice which can only be heard through self-critical listening. It is, of course, the Christian claim that Jesus is the definitive accentuation of “I am”, revealing the beneficence which lay behind wanting

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<sup>8</sup> Ex 4, 14 The burning bush which is not consumed seems to me a magnificent image of the power which is not in rivalry with, and thus not on the same level, as anything that is.

to address us at all, not out of any necessity, but so as to invite an entirely peripheral reality, the other which is ourselves, to share in the anterior and independent joy and love which is where “I am” is speaking from. It is scarcely surprising, alas, that what that beneficence looked like, in our midst, was the scarcely audible, scarcely visible, victim whom any “we” is likely to throw out so as to maintain its structure over against a wicked “they”.

The Catholic and Christian confession of Trinitarian monotheism is the confession that “I AM” has come amongst us as “I AM” always on the periphery of our vision, because always in our midst as one who is in the position of the one who is being thrown out, and always coming back as forgiving victim. Thus we are always being kept alive, as we could only be, by our “we”, which is typically blind to our victims, being punctured by the comings of the forgiving victim, the same “I AM” as Advocate. “I AM” is teaching us to see ourselves as a “we” not over against a “they”, but as part of a “they” which is becoming a “we” in the degree to which we come to perceive our similarity with our neighbour and thus, from being peripheral objects, come to share in the first person narrative which is Creation out of nothing and over against nothing at all, just delight.

Now, I like to think, and I hope that this is not just a fond and foolish imagination, that today’s patroness, Julian of Norwich, would have agreed with all this, and been happy with it. One of the things which is most remarkable about her work, as Fr John Julian has pointed out in the introduction to his translation of the *Revelations* is that in a lifespan of over seventy years which included everything from the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, the Papal schism, assassinations of a King and an Archbishop, the beginnings of Lollard heresy and so on, she makes not a single mention of any of these events. In fact, her life was a constant sitting, as one of the “they”, under the voice which says “I am” so as to learn the inner meaning of that “I am”. Her revelations are the irrelevant sitting, over time, in the hearing of the unimaginable “I am” before whom we are all “an other” and the learning to listen not to “walk in the way of this people”, to pay no attention to their detection of conspiracies, but instead to listen to the extraordinarily peaceful, powerful meaning of the love of the one who wants to speak to us, who is entirely without wrath, and because of the serenity of whose power we need be afraid of nothing at all.

I’d like to end by leaving this as a challenge to us. Is the monotheism which we profess an idea or a discovery? If it is an idea, we had better get involved in seeing how we can shore it up by setting up a wicked other, and perhaps the Muslim world would be a good place to start. Furthermore, we’ll find that many of them would just love it if we were to play that game, because it will enable them to play the victim card, and so rally their own forces together. If, however, our monotheism is a discovery, then I would suggest that we are in for the long haul as we learn to become irrelevant, learn to find that any strong sense of “I” or “we” has to be stripped away from us as we come to find ourselves as the other, invited along with all the other others, including the Muslim others, with whom we will discover our similarity, into becoming a “we” as we learn a certain passivity to, and a patient bearing of witness to, the “I Am” not over against anything at all, and giving us no excuse to be over against anything at all. Because that is the only way we will keep the discovery alive as a discovery, a constantly renewing being spoken to, and a being spoken into being, by “I Am” who is inaudible except in as far as we become habitually self-critical.

And it is only if our love of Christ and our following of him is part of our discovery not of being “right”, or being successful, or being relevant, or able to attract funds, or votes, or bring about democracy, or liberal values, but of being loved into being with all the others who we might be tempted to think of as our inferiors, being assured that we are liked as we let go of the things we think make us likeable, being assured of a peace which enables us to let go of our addiction to the power of this world and the relevance to which we must cling, it is only these which will enable us, over time to bear witness to Christ as God. Not the token messenger of a “he” which shores us up, but the quiet depth of the “I am” who shakes us into life.

I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face....and I will hope in him.

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