

L'Affaire Rushdie: A View from Judaism

A bumper sticker that recently appeared in our neighborhood (Wyncote, Pennsylvania) brazenly proclaims: "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it."

Thinking about this claim from the viewpoint of a religious non-fundamentalist, I noted that our version of the bumper sticker would have to be accompanied by commentary. "God said it" - now let's talk about what that means. "I believe it" - here we discuss the nature of faith, distinguishing religious from scientific language.

"And that settles it" - in fact nothing is settled at all. Our religion functions to raise questions, to stimulate thought, even to disquiet, rather than to "settle" things too easily.

The battle between religious fundamentalism and the modern world has filled the news this year: the rise of the Christian "religious right" in the recent elections, the struggle over Israel's Law of Return and the ultra-Orthodox "Who Is a Jew" campaign, and now, most dramatically, *l'affaire Salman Rushdie*. While the Shi'ites of Iran may give vent to bloodthirsty cries that shock the religious sensibilities of Jews and

Christians, the issue over which they scream "Death to Rushdie!" is one entirely familiar to adherents of the other Western traditions as well: the author has given offense to the truth claim of supposedly revealed scripture.

The three Near Eastern faiths that have so long dominated the religious lives of this half of humanity are all based upon such claims. Islam was long in fact the most tolerant of the three, admitting that Judaism and Christianity were also bearers of Allah's word, claiming that Mohammad was the "seal" of the prophets. Thus "only" countless thousands of heathen were put to the sword if they refused the truth that Muslim conquerors had to offer, while Jews and Christians were merely subjugated. Of course the Christian record is no better: heretics were burned for many centuries for denying orthodox views on the divinity of Christ, the efficacy of the sacraments, or the literal truth of Scripture.

Jews killed off the ancient Canaanites, "purifying" the

Holy Land of idolatry. If they did not later do the same to heretics or religious rivals the way their sister faiths did, it is probably because they did not have the temporal authority to do so. At least that is what is strongly suggested by the behavior of certain circles within Jewry today.

In the face of all this, it seems worthwhile to ask why we religious non-fundamentalists hang onto - and even seek to reclaim - a religious language in which we clearly do not believe as do the orthodox. I raise my cup of wine on Friday evening knowing full well that I am not a literal believer in the Biblical tale of creation. I take comfort from the fact that many of my friends in the Christian priesthood will know the same as they raise their cups on Sunday morning. (Our parallel numbers in the Islamic world are harder to find, but I'm sure they exist.) Why, then, do we insist on these forms of expression? What do they give us that we could not find in a more contemporary, and more believable, religious language?

The religious person is one who maintains an awareness that we live in relation to the trans-

endent, to that ultimate origin, source, or ground of being that we mortals choose to call "God". We address the ultimate one as person in the language of prayer, but we know that the ground of being reaches far beyond the bounds of person. Our attempt to sustain the awareness that underlies our faith leads us both to cultivate the life of inwardness and to seek the transformation of society into one that is more humane, more responsive to suffering, more conforming to the visions of all of our prophets.

We religious humanists, while not knowing a God who intervenes supernaturally in human affairs, continue to affirm that religion is as great a vital bearer of humanity's spiritual heritage, and it carries within it a truth much deeper than the one so loudly proclaimed by its would-be defenders.

We speak the old religious language, to be sure, but we do so in a new way. Part of the power of myth and symbol lies in their very antiquity. The richness of association they bear, their ties both to history and to eternity itself do not allow us to give up on them, no matter how far we

may be from literal belief.

I will never know if the tribes that made up ancient Israel were ever in Egypt, and I surely do not believe, in the historical sense, that God split the sea to bring them out. And yet retelling the tale of the Exodus deepens my own inner freedom, strengthens my commitment to the liberation of others, and daily renews my sense of the ultimate miracle, that of existence itself.

Raising that wine cup to celebrate creation puts me in touch not only with countless generations of ancestors who have done the same, but also gives expression to my faith that the world is indeed touched by a divine hand, filled with a presence that defies expression in any language but that of the sacred. Every word I use to express that reality may be mythic, but the object of that myth remains, even for this non-fundamentalist, ultimately real.

I do not expect to be able to explain this to the ayatollah. Even the religious right within Jewry will have a hard time with these words. But as a member of a faith community that has succeeded, after long struggle, in articulating a serious but

non-literalist religious position, I would like to reach out to the many young Muslims who must be mortified and shaken by the denunciations of what is admittedly a work of fiction. If only we could leap across the generations to help them! But their pattern will probably follow ours, and generations of the most educated and thinking will leave the faith, disgusted by the primitive outlook of its old time spokesmen and their screaming warriors.

Some of the grandchildren of these renegades will find their way back, a few of them seeking to create an old-new Islam, one that will be able to bring the great and profound truths of that tradition into the modern world, realizing that their value does not depend on literal notions of revelation.

Such an Islam will not be threatened by critical history, by interfaith dialogue, or by parody. May we see it emerge soon, soon enough to provide an alternative to the equally tragic paths of violent fundamentalism and wholesale abandonment of tradition.

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