INTRODUCTION

MONOTHEISM AND ETHICS: A WORTHY AND TIMELY TOPIC

Abrahamic faiths is a valid designation that captures much of the essence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, especially their shared affirmation of a single God. Outbursts of pugnacious particularism, motivated by political agendas, often backed by force of arms, cannot nullify this—as indeed, philosophically inclined monotheists firmly believe that the Truth is unassailable, whatever artillery may be leveled against it. The essays in this volume aim to test the assumption that monotheism is the key factor that shapes the religion’s ethic; consequentially, religions that are monotheistic will, *eo ipso*, share common ethical values, guidelines and frameworks. Monotheism can be philosophically, theologically, historically, and culturally complex, and terminological clarity can be elusive. We may well wonder if we will be able to get our project off the ground.

On the other hand, there are manifest theoretical and historical grounds for maintaining that a monotheistic ethic exists. Most, but not all, of the papers that make up this volume, widely diverse as they are with regard to topic and approach, argue that such an ethic does exist, and attempt to get a handle on it. Narrowing our focus to the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—makes the case stronger; the long-term historical interactions between these faith communities, as well as the significant body of shared revelation (however differently interpreted) that is foundational to all three, ought to facilitate—in practice, it did and does facilitate—the articulation of a common ethic. Nonetheless, the Abrahamic faiths absorb ethical principles from without. Indeed, the philosophical underpinning of the ethicists in these traditions is drawn mostly from Hellenistic thinkers, especially Plato and Aristotle, two names that feature prominently in many of the essays in this book.

Significantly, those two luminaries are now often labeled pagan monotheists; a neologism, to be sure, but one which, I aver, would have been recognizable and acceptable to al-Fārābī, Maimonides, or Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, all three faiths had some significant interaction with Zoroastrianism, a religion which reified good and evil in a manner that led to a dualism soundly rejected by the Abrahamic faiths, but which may nonetheless be dubbed monotheistic (or perhaps henotheistic) insofar as only
the Good force is deified. Useful comparisons can be made with India as well, though in that case the actual historical interaction was minimal.

Not a few people would smirk at the very attempt to explore so deeply the connections between monotheism and ethics. Lenn Goodman opens the volume with a vigorous justification for the enterprise, despite the many obstacles at arriving at a consensus. Moral insights are enriched by spiritual intuitions, and the teachings of religion are aided by the reasoning of ethicists. Monotheism and ethics require each other, neither can be reduced to the other, nor is the one hostile to the other. Their relationship is best characterized by the Platonic concept of the unity of virtues—the virtues reinforce each other, but each remains distinct.

Goodman’s argument rests on the idea of God as paramount value concept. Monotheism is not just the belief in a single God, but rather the decision to see “in God’s unity the unity of all that is affirmative—beauty and truth, life and creativity”. The ethical imperative of monotheism is thus the boundless command for all of us, humans though we are, to pursue God’s perfection, and to bring out in ourselves all the good, and all the holiness, that we can.

So let us proceed. In order to carry out this project, we perhaps ought first to define monotheism in theory and then examine how it shapes, informs, motivates, and characterizes ethical attitudes and practices in discrete traditions and communities. William Scott Green reviews the issues and answers clearly and thoroughly, negotiating between the philosophical analysis that finds it difficult if not impossible to identify any intrinsic, organic connection between monotheism and a particular ethic, and the sense of the actors—the millions of adherents to the Abrahamic religions, including many intellectuals and communal leaders—that such a connection exists, that it is firm, that it is the prime motivating force behind their efforts to lead an ethical life, and, most importantly for this book, that this ethic, in its basic principles and in many details as well, is shared by other Abrahamic traditions—all the while maintaining a theological and votive distance from those faiths.

However, experts in both monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions have argued, each on the basis of appropriate sources, that they all reward behavior that is beneficial to others. Therefore, altruism, one of the most esteemed ethical traits, is a secular rather than a religious value. Studies on reciprocity (the “Golden Rule”) lead to similar conclusions. Green cautions that theological convictions and theistic constructions may well be secondary causes for the development of a religion’s ethic and that evolutionary, cognitive, and social factors may provide a more comprehensive