

A Great Religion?

Christopher Alexion

Shortly after September 11, President Bush declared that the Islamic terrorists responsible for bringing down the World Trade Center and damaging the Pentagon had “hijacked a great religion.” This certainly sounds nice, and does a good job of assuring American Muslims that war has not been declared on them (it has not).

The implications of this phrase, however, are not so benign. The first question we ought to raise is what it means to say that something is “great.” What is a great novel, a great car, or a great religion? Usually the term *great* implies that the object you are describing is particularly high on a certain scale. In other words, you are comparing your car or novel with the perfect car or the perfect novel. Dickens measures up; LaHaye and Jenkins don’t.

So to say that Islam (or Buddhism or animism, for that matter) is a “great” religion is to imply the existence of an objective scale of religions to which some religions measure up and others do not. But this brings up a second question: what is the objective scale of religions President Bush uses to make his value judgment of Islam? It can’t be orthodox Islam itself, for orthodox Islam teaches that it is the only true religion—not merely a “great” religion. It can’t be orthodox Christianity or Judaism, for they both condemn Islam. It can’t be secular humanism, for good atheists condemn all three as “pie in the sky” religions.

Instead, it seems to be a particular philosophy peculiar to George W. Bush, which for the sake of discussion we shall call “Dubyaism.” Dubyaism holds that certain doctrines (such as the existence of God, the dignity of human life, and socialized airline security) are objectively true. As such it rejects the more extreme forms of epistemological and ethical relativism.

Yet Dubyaism slips into a different form of relativism: religious syncretism. President Bush, though a professing Christian, seems to have difficulty believing the Christian doctrine that there is “none other name under heaven given among men [other than Christ’s] whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He would rather believe that Christ is “a way, a truth, and a life”—not necessarily *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life (cf. Jn. 14:6). He has no difficulty accepting Islam and Judaism as faiths equal with, or perhaps different forms of, his own.

In this he mirrors Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, who commends those believers who have “reinterpreted their faith in a way that embrace[s] modernity.” George W. Bush will likewise accept scriptural revelation *except* when it contradicts the prejudices he has acquired from modernity. At that point revelation—beginning with John 14—must be “reinterpreted.” Anything less would be uncivilized.

But the lapse in this reasoning is embarrassingly obvious. Suppose we point the question back at Bush and Friedman. They are perfectly willing to reinterpret our beliefs for us, but are they willing to question theirs? Are they willing to step outside Dubyaism and consider that Christian “exclusivism” may not be wrong but simply a belief conformed to reality and rationality? That is, are they willing to do what they demand of others?

“Don’t be silly,” they would probably rejoin. “Why should we do that? We are enlightened, you know. We have outgrown archaic and exclusive views like that.” Exactly. They are able to critique the dogmas of others because they are standing on their own dogma. Yet this dogma, to be worth anything, must be absolute and unquestioned—the view that all things must be judged by modernity cannot *itself* be judged by modernity.

We Christians must resist these attempts to smudge the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought, and we must do so by emphasizing the antithesis between Christian thought and “modernity.” Modernity, contra Friedman, is not the supreme judge of religious truth but one particular (and exclusive) religious view. We need to point out that, while Bush and Friedman do a good job of disparaging exclusivist dogmatism, they’re in the same boat.

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