

## **Cults, Mormons, and Religious Pluralism**

Sermon on Exodus 33:18-23 (from Shabbat during Sukkot Torah Reading)

Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth

October 15, 2011

I love what you said, Lexi, about all of us being able to catch glimpses of “God’s back,” though we cannot fully understand God. Maybe, just maybe, a few prophets and saints over the ages have had a more direct look. But even most of the greatest acknowledge that God is so far beyond us and our human understanding that we can scarcely even hope to fully understand the divine, in the poetic terms of this chapter of the Torah, to look at God face-to-face. Praising Moses after his death, the Torah suggests in the last chapter of Deuteronomy that he did see God face-to-face, but this morning’s passage is more typical. The great mystics of the ages in every religious tradition tell of directly experiencing God, and in the process being left both utterly inspired and totally unable, in mere human language, to describe the experience. God is so far beyond us and our understanding that even the religious geniuses of history are left stammering when they try to express the ineffable.

We humans, therefore, much of the time, are humble when it comes to claiming an understanding of God. So it should not surprise us that there are many different religions and religious understandings. Since we only catch glimpses, we do the best we can to teach our children what faith is all about and what God requires of us, and since no one has perfect understanding of God, no one can claim a monopoly on the truth.

Sadly, that does not stop some—in every religious tradition!—from claiming, and truly believing, that they and they alone know God correctly, and everyone else, anyone who thinks differently, therefore, is wrong at best, damned at worst. But most of us are willing to admit that lots of people are doing their best to be faithful in belief and in deeds. In America especially, with church/state separation in our Constitution, we have a wonderful tradition of freedom of conscience going back to the Constitution and the founders, and before them to religious freedom pioneers like Baptist minister Roger Williams.

I brave the thin ice of electoral politics, therefore, with some trepidation. I have not, and will not, from the pulpit, come out for or against a specific candidate for President. I believe that would be a violation of the tradition of church/state separation. So, believe me, I am not coming out for or against Mitt Romney or John Huntsman, who are seeking the Republican nomination for President of the United States. But it would be irresponsible to remain silent when they are being attacked by at least one prominent religious leader, and not because of their views on any given issue, but because they are Mormons. If candidates were attacked for being Jews, I certainly hope there are clergy of other faiths who would speak out to call that illegitimate. So I need to say something in this case.

I refer, of course, to repeated statements by Dr. Robert Jeffries of Dallas endorsing one

candidate and putting down others—Mitt Romney in particular as a front-runner—for being Mormon. I have read in article after article that Pastor Jeffries said that Mormonism is a cult. So we need to consider what that opprobrious term means in our time. Fortunately, I also recently heard a sound-bite of Dr. Jeffries making that accusation, and I was shocked to find that what I had read was not the half of it! He did not simply say that his church regards Mormonism as a cult, but rather that his church regards Mormonism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism as cults. Judaism, apparently, perhaps because Jesus and the early Christians were Jews, escaped that description. But we are still talking about a sweeping condemnation of the religions of literally billions of people.

If we only catch glimpses of God, Who is bigger than any of us and our stammering efforts to describe the God of the Universe and Author of all Life, how could Dr. Jeffries be so sure?

So, first, what do we mean by “cult”? And, second, is Mormonism one?

It has been a about 30 years decades since the Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the “Moonies” made headlines saying that “divine deception” was legitimate. The point was to make converts, and if, to do that, you did not admit your true beliefs much less your real agenda, that was alright. That was also the era when Jim Jones took his followers to a private religious settlement, “Jonestown” in Guyana (South America), where he could be the theocratic ruler, and financial and sexual exploiter. When questions were raised and authorities were sent to investigate, he and his followers, at his command, willingly drank poisoned Cool Aide before he could be exposed as a fraud.

That is the sort of thing we mean, in contemporary parlance, when we speak of cults. “Stop thinking for yourself; I’ll tell you what to believe,” is the message of the cult leader, which often goes together with, “Stay away from your parents; drop out of school; be devoted only to God—and thus to me as God’s representative.” Cults are not only non-mainstream religions. They are exploitive and dishonest. Every new religion—and historically every religion was new once—is condemned by the established authorities (Judaism thought the new Christians were heretics; Christians thought Muslims were heretics; Catholics thought Protestants were heretics; Orthodox Jews thought Reform Jews were heretics, Protestants thought Unitarians and then Mormons were heretics). Freedom of conscience means you *can* think new religious thoughts and start new congregations and organizations; *it is only the exploitation and deception which entitles us to call something a cult.*

If my colleague in Dallas wants to call Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism wrong, I think he could use a bit of humility given that the youngest of those traditions has been around for about 1500 years and currently has over a billion followers, and the older ones date back thousands of years. Is Mormonism different?

It is difficult, frankly, for a non-Christian to regard Mormonism—the official name of the

group is “the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints”—as anything other than another Christian group. But I know there are many Christian groups who do not recognize one another as authentically Christian, so that leaves the question open. For some it is a scandal that Mormons believe they got a new revelation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—but, as I just mentioned—that is a repetitive pattern through history. Given that adherents of every religion naturally think they have the best way, and thus that others are off track at least a bit, if not a lot, by what measure, we might ask, can one distinguish a legitimate religion from an (at least arguably) evil one?

Here are some common accusations that won’t work. Didn’t Mormons use to believe in polygamy; and a few still do? Yes, but so did Jews—and I don’t just mean in biblical times. When Sephardic Jews from Morocco and Yemen arrived in Israel 60 years ago, some of them brought multiple wives. The 10<sup>th</sup> century Jewish prohibition of polygamy in Europe had not penetrated all of the Sephardic world.

Didn’t Mormons once preach the inferiority of non-white races? Yes, around the same time that a lot of white Protestant Churches were preaching that. Both have repudiated that since.

Do Mormons deny the trinity? I have read that, too. But so do Unitarians and so do Jews. Dr. Jeffries no doubt thinks us misguided, but does not regard us as cultists.

We could go on in that vein scoring debaters’ points. More relevant, I think, is the work of a leading Protestant theologian named John Hick, who has written extensively on interfaith relations and understanding. Hick argues that every major religion helps its adherents to find meaning in their lives (often called “salvation”), and to lead good moral lives. Says Dr. Hick:

it would be hazardous in the extreme for any of the great faiths to claim that its adherents are, morally and spiritually, better human beings than the rest of the human race.<sup>1</sup>

Good religions produce good people: loving, helpful, charitable, law-abiding, sober folk; not perfect people (only God is perfect), but solid citizens. All the major religious traditions do that!, says the Protestant theologian, and I concur. Hick likes to quote the sentiment in chapter 7 of the gospel of Matthew (7:16 and 7:20): “by their fruits you shall know them.” Are Mormon families as wholesome as others, and do Mormon communities turn out decent, loving citizens? Of course! We know that. They are our neighbors. If you wanted to draw up a list of outstanding examples of public-spirited individuals, not only would it not be hard to find them, but Governor Romney and Ambassador Huntsman would be a promising beginning to the list. Vote for or against them based on their political views; that is another matter. But the implication that they and millions of others are “cultists” is slanderous.

We all get our glimpses of God’s back. Then we do the best we can to discern how to relate to God, and how God would have us behave.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup>John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science* (MacMillan, 2006 and 2010), p. 149.