Consensus

Volume 28
Issue 2 *Spirituality and Health*

Article 13

11-25-2002

Elementary Monotheism

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Recommended Citation
Uitti, Roger W. (2002) "Elementary Monotheism," *Consensus*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss2/13

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Elementary Monotheism I: Exposure, Limitation, and Need
Elementary Monotheism II: Action and Language in Historical Religion

Andrew P. Porter
Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001
I: 282 pages; II: 257 pages, $195.81 Hardcover Set

As I read these two volumes, I asked myself "Why me?" A philosopher of religion, a cultural anthropologist, a systematic theologian, a professor of church history and/or world religions rather than a biblical teacher would seem the better choice to review this work on "elementary monotheism." Yet the author's singular devotion to the historical-covenantal religion of what he terms "the Common Documents (rather than the Old Testament with its Christian orientation, or the Hebrew Bible with its potential Marcionite implications), together with his exposition of the *Shema* (3.2; I, 26-35; 3.4; I, 46-53), select Hebrew words (10.3; II, 14-27), and the seven lessons to be drawn from the Exodus event (6.4; I, 128-141), scattered references to BDB, Henri Frankfort, and Old Testamentlichers such as H.H. Rowley, Otto Kaiser, Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, Hans Walter Wolff, Walter Brueggemann, and Richard Friedman, convinced me there was some merit to continue reading. Yet, others more conversant with the thought of Immanuel Kant, Ernst Troeltsch, Georges Dumézil, Martin Heidegger, H. Richard Niebuhr, Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, Langdon Gilkey, Peter Berger, John C. Murray, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Merold Westphal, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Paul Ricoeur, would no doubt bring more and different musings.

The author, Andrew P. Porter (1946-) is a physicist (1994-) at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, CA, and teaches as an adjunct faculty member both in the department of philosophy of religion, GTU, Berkeley, CA (1998-) and in the department of philosophy and religious studies at Dominican University, in San Rafael, CA (2001-). His vita off the Internet shows how his undergraduate and graduate work have prepared him for this book's challenge. I noted his undergraduate education in physics and chemistry (BA 1968), his MS (1968) and first PhD (1976, U. of California) in applied science ("The Method of Independent Timesteps in the Numerical Solution of Initial Value Problems"), and his MTS (1980) and second PhD (1991, GTU, Berkeley, CA) in the philosophy of religion. His MTS thesis

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("Meeting God in History, Relativity, and Pluralism") and second PhD dissertation ("H. Richard Niebuhr's Doctrine of Providence in the Light of Martin Heidegger's Phenomenology") clearly have served to lay a foundation for this undertaking.

Within the very first pages the author acknowledges his debt to his teacher and colleague, Edward C. Hobbs, without whose idea that monotheists embrace "exposure, limitation, and need" this project would not have happened. Porter defines religion not in terms of Schleiermacher's "feeling of dependence," but as one's "basic life orientation." Thus, even atheists practice some species of religion. The first of two starting points in this monograph is the carrying forward of H. Richard Niebuhr's two certainties about biblical religion: one, that biblical religion affirms life in this world as good; two, that biblical religion is radically historical: that history is the chief medium of revelation, that history replaces nature as the essential ingredient of human life.

Four questions from John Courtney Murray supply the work's overall structure: Where is God when we need God? If God is here, what is God doing? How do we know God? And how do we name God? The first volume takes up the first two questions: "Present or Absent?" and "How is God Present?" The second volume treats the remaining two: "Knowing Providence" and "Languaging Providence."

By the author's own admission, chapter 3 ("Three Faces of Monotheism") of the first volume is the seminal chapter. If monotheism embraces all of life as good, including the downsides that other faiths reject, how do these downsides bear blessings? They do so because the monotheist meets God in situations of exposure, limitation, and need. Exposure means to be confronted for what we are. Limitation is to be up against what potentially cannot be. To meet need is to experience demands on our own time and resources. Still, exposure tests legitimacy and heals falseness; though limitation requires action, it presents opportunities; and need fulfills human moral obligation and creates togetherness and community.

The basic structure of faith is likewise defined as threefold: confidence, loyalty, and acknowledgment. Faith comes from history by grace, not by positivist proof or empirical testing. The author asserts we faith by walking as much as we walk by faithing.

The tripartite conceptual thinking of radical monotheism is also extended to help explain the use of threefold social structures and even the functional articulations of Christian Trinitarianism that unfolded in

the history of western Indo-European culture. Such thinking is contrasted, for example, with the more radial, spherical Hebraic thinking of *lev*, *nephesh*, and *me'od* (from the inner person to outward muchness), as exhibited in the *Shema*.

The second volume is given over to a discussion of knowing and "languaging" providence. Providence, if there is any, the author argues, must bring good out of pain and wrongdoing. One who truly believes in providence will experience a profound transformation of the view of life. Bad becomes transformed into good. God's seeming "No" turns out to be "Yes". Knowledge of God is termed more a matter of human action than of testing doctrinal propositions. The author attempts to demonstrate how language both informs and constitutes human historical living. It is in and through language that human acts are given meaning and orientation. Indeed, only in language does the notion of God become real and thematic.

The writer illustrates how revelation in history itself follows the threefoldness of exposure, limitation, and need. Revelation resurrects the sad, forgotten, buried, and embarrassing past. This is history working as exposure. Revelation saves the past from senselessness. This is history working in its second function, as limitation. The doing of history, the telling and writing of history, creates and extends community. This is history working in its third function, as need.

Throughout the work, Merold Westphal supplies the religious options to be dealt with: 1) historical-covenantal religion (taking life primarily as history, with nature present only secondarily); 2) mimetic religion (primarily seeking mimesis or imitation of nature); and 3) exilic religion (seeking escape from both history and nature, to an ideal realm elsewhere than the nitty-gritty of this world). Mutual human need is universal, but the affirmation of all of life requires people to move from ecosystem (nature system of mutual exploitation) to human and moral community (where people are radically part of one another and open to outsiders). This is historical and covenantal religion. To mimetic religion and exilic religion, history is invisible and irrelevant. The author comments that the two non-monotheistic alternatives to historical-covenantal religion have been and still are present as temptation, from the cyclical nature religions of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the escapist religions of Orphic, Pythagorean, and Platonist tradition, Gnosticism, and Advaita Vedanta to today's religions of nature (ecology, environmentalism, scientism) and modern Gnosticism (http://www.webcom.com/gnosis).

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For his "confessional approach" the author is to be commended. Knowledge of God is confessional rather than deductive or relativist. A confessional stance, one that embraces exposure, limitation, and need, must ever be ready to modify or change itself to be true to itself. Porter is thus respectful to approach Christianity and Judaism as legitimate daughters of the Second Temple. Indeed, for him, it would be a matter of "henotheism" to posit an exclusive "or" between the church and the synagogue after the fall of Jerusalem, or even worse, to second the motto *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*! As to exposure in history, in Jewish-Christian relations, the author is understandably hard on Christian forebears. One would have wished that the author had given some space, if ever so brief, to the same phenomenon in reverse, i.e., corresponding exposure in history past and present of Jewish anti-Christianism. If Jews deserve respect from Christians for their embodiment of the covenant in Torah, Christians need to hear from Jews some similar admission. Regrettably, also insufficient space is given as to how the other historic monotheistic faith, Islam, would fit into the total picture, as well as to those other world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism) notable in degrees for their resistance to historical thinking.

The author would have the support of the academy to approach religion straight on, with total commitment to the critical historical canons of Ernst Troeltsch. Thus, his methodological attempt to seek out first providence rather than any Provider is academically safe, as we do experience God as provident, long before we begin talking about God's beingness. For good or bad the descriptive revelatory language of Niebuhr is assumed to be accurate. Revelation essentially is treated in terms of what the West has received scripturally, as transcript, rather than as real-time event with accompanying word. One comes away from the whole work with the impression that the Bible is made to fit into an already entrenched religio-historical philosophical framework. In the end, any confession of life after life would be escapist "exilic" theology. Would Christianity agree? Would Islam? The reduction of elementary monotheism to three basic recurrent themes (exposure, limitation, and need) could be too simplistic and brash to be true, and to extend such to explain all the functional Trinitarian formulations of the Christian West might be near the edge.

The two volumes are consistently masculine in the use of pronouns everywhere except in the section on abortion and contraception. This is surprising, if not disturbing, for a philosophical work that revels in

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exposure and inclusiveness for all. Surely, at least half of his story is her story.

There is much to learn and reflect upon in this publication. The strength of the work is its understandable and lucid writing. At the onset of each unit the author announces what he is going to do, then does it, and then summarizes for the reader what he has done. Porter disambiguates a complex religio-philosophical subject with apt illustration and wit ("One of the Three Great Lies: 'I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you.'"). The reader comes away better appreciating the differences between pluralism and plurality, anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, henotheistic, Gnostic, and monotheistic faith, locution, illocution, and perlocution, internal and external history, mimetic, exilic, and historical-covenantal religion. The section on anti-Semitism (8.1; I, 181-210) is very worth reading as well as the discussion on abortion and euthanasia (12.1-4; II, 57-92). As the author appropriates a rich intellectual heritage of prior thinking, the volumes are replete with innumerable insights conducive to teaching and sermonizing. Each of the volumes has a subject and author index. The second volume adds a final bibliography of essential works cited.

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Revelation and the End of All Things
Craig R. Koester
3 Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001
209 pages, $24.95 Softcover

Perhaps the most controversial and debated text in the New Testament, the book of Revelation, has had a long history of use and misuse. *Revelation and the End of All Things* uses close literary analysis to place Revelation in historical and social context while raising issues relevant to our world. Koester's goal is to remove two thousand years of theology to look at Revelation in the terms of its time and place of writing. Koester, a professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, has written similar texts on Hebrews

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