

11-1-2009

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It seems obvious that religion should be conformable to the natural law, and that any serious incompatibility of religion with the natural law would cast its validity into doubt. This presupposition caused interpretative problems for Aquinas and other scholastics, when they considered Old Testament instances in which God allegedly commanded actions prohibited by the natural law, as usually understood. The chief *cause célèbre*, of course, was the divine command to the patriarch Abraham¹ to slay his son Isaac. But Aquinas mentions other examples also – the instructions to the Israelites emancipated from Egypt to steal gold and silver from the Egyptians before departing, and the command to the prophet Osee to commit fornication as a sign of unfaithfulness of the ‘chosen people’ to their divine Spouse;² *prima facie* problems also existed with Abraham's apparent lie in telling Pharaoh that his wife, Sara, was his ‘sister,’ and Jacob's lie to Isaac about being Esau, the firstborn.³ For some reason, difficult for us moderns to understand, Aquinas didn't seem to consider it important to discuss instances in the Old Testament of the ‘Ban’ (*herem*) – the divine commands to Joshua and others, which sometimes involved wholesale extermination of men, women and children in their campaigns against the enemy.⁴ Possibly considerations of changing customs and rhetorical interpretations may

help to blunt the apparent affinity of these latter instances with what we call 'genocide.'⁵

Aquinas considers some of above problems to be merely apparent – Sara according to the then-prevalent kinship patterns was the sister of Abraham, and Jacob, because of an arrangement previously made with Esau, did acquire the rights of the firstborn; but he argues that, in any case, God as author of the natural law can, for particular purposes in Salvation History, authorize what appears to our limited understanding as exceptions.

Whether or not we accept such explanations as satisfactory, it should be kept in mind that the anomalous, seemingly immoral permissions or mandates mentioned above were special enactments enjoined on particular individuals in specific instances connected with Salvation History, but not representative of any *global* acceptance of immorality in the Hebrew religion. In other words, there was no general mandate or permission in the Old Testament for child sacrifice, theft from gentiles, lying for personal advantage, wholesale massacres, or symbolic acts of fornication. If Judaism *as a religion* mandated or even approved of child sacrifice, for instance, this would be sufficient grounds for any rational person for condemning that religion, no matter how forceful and credible its divine credentials might appear to be. Similarly if Buddhism as a religion encouraged self-immolation to protest war, or Hinduism required widows to throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husband, or to burn wives whose families would not pay supplemental dowries, these religions would justly be rejected on a natural-law basis. (The caste system in India, now illegal but still practiced, if considered *integral* to Indian religion, could indicate a natural-law ground for the invalidity of Hinduism as a religion.)

A special problem emerges in the case of religions inaugurated and propagated by *prophets*. How does one respond to someone who claims to be sent by God, with a distinct message, ordaining a way of life that in effect constitutes a new religion? This is a question especially relevant to major prophetically 'founded' religions such as Christianity, Islam and Mormonism, as well as sects springing up like the Heaven's Gate cult under Jim Jones in Guinea, or the apocalyptic Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, under David Koresh. There is

obviously a threat to a rational society in such cases: anyone, with a gift for rhetoric and a charismatic personality, could claim being sent by God, and press demands and injunctions on receptive persons with theistic proclivities and a desire for special supernal guidance. In the New Testament and in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, various criteria are provided for judging the validity of prophets and prophecies, as well as warnings against imposters and prophetic fabrications. But even prior to employing such criteria, initial applications of natural-law principles may help to obviate deleterious or counterproductive religious allegiances.

If there is any viable natural law pertaining to the choice of a religion, the natural law for pursuing knowledge, and striving for *truth*, is certainly the most important, and would be absolutely relevant to the acceptance of, and commitment to, any religion. A rational being, examining a prophetically-introduced religion, and concerned about finding a valid source of truth, would first of all need to ask questions about the prophet propounding the religion: 1) What about the character of the prophet? One would naturally rule out inveterate liars, con-men, thieves and lechers, and insist on evidence of basic moral goodness in one allegedly chosen by God to communicate with humankind. 2) Granted that there are no obvious misgivings regarding character, what evidence exists that the prophet has been actually commissioned, sent by God? If someone claiming to be an envoy or diplomat from a country presented himself to the government of another country, his possession of official papers and portfolios, and other signs of legitimate delegation would be *de rigueur*. What sort of authentication could God give to bona fide messengers? What would constitute divine certification, what would stand as the proper 'credentials'?

We might contend that the criteria making possible belief in a *supernatural* religion would be supernatural signs. The many miracles attributed to Jesus in the New Testament are sometimes characterized by theologians as peripheral to his message – even as embarrassments, leading people to focus on 'signs and wonders' and miss out on the Gospel or 'good news' of the real, historical Jesus. But these miracles – the testimony given by the voice of the Father in Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist, the appearance of Moses and Elias with Jesus at the Transfiguration, the multiple powerful healings

and exorcisms, etc. – were absolutely essential for identifying the Messiah, somewhat like the 'electronic signatures' used in contemporary computer data transmissions to maintain security. As Jesus put it (*John 10:38*), 'If you don't believe me, believe the works that I perform.' In effect, the miraculous works declared that 'this man is from God.'

Miracles sometimes occur in connection with proficient in religions outside the Judaeo-Christian parameters – e.g. Hindu Yogis are reported to levitate off the ground, or produce spiritual fragrances; Buddhist monks are said to have endured intolerable pains unflinchingly, or go without food for extraordinary durations. But such miracles would simply offer evidence of extraordinary individual spiritual power, and are not meant or even claimed to provide proof that the yogi or bodhisattva is sent by God with a message for humankind. The miracles in the Judeo-Christian tradition, on the other hand, are often geared towards designating individuals sent by God, and for distinguishing true prophets from false prophets and magicians.

Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), based on the alleged miraculous appearance of an angel with gold tablets to Joseph Smith, and with revelations claiming to reform Christianity, has never been characterized by any publicly observable miracles. The fact that some highly suggestible and superstitious family members and cronies of Smith claimed that they had seen the gold tablets before they disappeared, would amount to a private visionary experience, but hardly a New Testament type of miracle – witnessed by friends and enemies, believers and unbelievers. The fact that the three main and original witnesses of the gold plates were all eventually excommunicated from the church indicates a need for additional caution. Claims of supernatural origin are proffered by the *Book of Mormon*: a history of a migration of ancient Hebrews to America, some of whom were privileged with a revelation from Jesus Christ after his Ascension into heaven; and the spiritual renewal of the true church of God, after the Catholic Church had been taken over by the devil and become the 'whore of Babylon.'⁶ But ironically, for a church which is famous for its emphasis on genealogy (to search for ancestors to receive proxy 'baptisms'), contemporary DNA testing by anthropologists traces the origin of Native Americans to the Altai

Mountains of Northeastern Siberia and Northern China – which rules out any possibility of genetic connection with ancient Hebrews.⁷

Later Mormon scriptures such as *Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*, and the discourses of Smith's successor, Brigham Young, go into Mormon doctrines in great detail. The incompatibility of these doctrines with Christianity – e.g., God as a body rather than a spirit,⁸ God evolving from original human status,⁹ Jesus in a polygamous marriage,¹⁰ lawful polygamy,¹¹ 'celestial marriage' of faithful Mormons in the afterlife,¹² and proxy baptisms for those who have died unbaptized¹³– coupled with the fact that the Book of Mormon is replete with texts and paraphrases (including misspellings corrected in later editions) from the King James translation of the Bible¹⁴– would make a rational person, committed to the truth, have serious doubts that God would go to such lengths to contradict New Testament beliefs.

Other natural-law issues also enter into the equation: The questionable morals of the womanizing,¹⁵ money-hungry and highly ambitious Joseph Smith would add to our state of wonderment: why would God be so anxious to bolster the case of this man? Certainly we are confronted in the Smithean revelations with a prophet who is in no way able to challenge his detractors as Jesus did (John 8:46), 'Can any of you charge me with sin?'

On the other hand, if we focus on the *strictly ethical* doctrines of Mormonism at present, in the aftermath of official Mormon doctrinal reversals of original tenets regarding polygamy (1890) and the inferiority of blacks (1978), no major natural-law concerns stand out.

The situation is otherwise with Islam. Interwoven into the Qur'an are explicit doctrines mandating worldwide spread of the religion, even by force, allowing merely temporary compromises in situations where Muslims are in a minority,¹⁶ the absolute subjection of women to men,¹⁷ and cruel and disproportionate punishments, including execution for conversion of a Muslim to Christianity or any other religion.¹⁸ The characteristics of the prophet, Muhammad, would instill even greater doubts into someone considering the religion. Muhammad had a massive harem,¹⁹ including a child bride²⁰ and the acquisition of his adopted son's wife (for which, in view of unseemly

appearances, a special revelation from the angel Gabriel had to be issued²¹); received a personal message from Gabriel freeing Muhammed from the Islamic four-wife limit;²² announced the superiority of males and their right to beat wives;²³ a warlord-prophet gathering booty from bloody campaigns against Jews and pagans,²⁴ receiving one-fifth of the booty by Divine dispensation,²⁵ receiving special dispensation to lie,²⁶ to break treaties,²⁷ and kill all who oppose his message²⁸— seems not to be the sort of messenger God might choose, unless God for some reason was merely trying to further the worldly interests of Muhammad. And like Joseph Smith, the only 'miracle' connected with Muhammad's message was a purely private miracle: his claim of being transported to Jerusalem by an angel. (A Muslim legend also reports that once, when challenged about whether his prophetic mission was supported by miracles, Muhammad pointed to the Qu'ran, dictated by a reputedly illiterate man, as his incontestable miracle.)

But some religions and religious movements present a challenge of a different sort to natural law: Gnosticism, Jansenism, the Amish, Christian Science, the Luddites, various closed communal or communist sects, etc. In such cases, the main issue is not so much conformity to natural law, but the respect for various natural *rights* implied by natural law – the right to marry, implied by the natural law of reproducing, and nurturing and protecting progeny; the right to care for the body's physical needs, preserve health, and own private property, implied by the natural law of self-preservation; the right to develop a more advanced social network, implied by the natural law of fostering a rational society; and the right to investigate scientific and historical truth, implied by the natural law that obliges one to pursue knowledge and truth.

What about the case of Christianity? Does Christianity 'pass muster' with natural law? For many, Christianity poses a challenge both in the light of natural law and of natural rights. First of all, the natural law of seeking the truth becomes strained to the uppermost when we contemplate the Gospel message which sounds like a fairy tale – the Creator of the *universe* sending his Son, Jesus, in human form to live among us and suffer and die in the flesh. A human being is challenged even further when this God-man tells us to 'Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect'.²⁹ This injunction sounds very much

like a mandate, rather than a mere counsel, and human nature balks at even contemplating the implementation of 'perfection.' But finally, the most famous and distinctive Gospel injunctions that tell us to love our enemies and those that hate us, to do good to them without any hope of reciprocation, and to pray for them,³⁰ could lead a sincere adherent of natural law to throw up his hands in exasperation. For this injunction means, presumably, that I must love those who oppress me, steal from me, injure me, try to do away with me, or intentionally delight in torturing me in every conceivable way. This is like the proverbial 'last straw.' The rape victim should love the rapist? The villager in the Sudan should love the Muhhajadin who have just murdered her whole family, burnt their house to the ground and destroyed their village? The torture victim should love the fanatical sadists who inflict pain and humiliation on him? Americans should love the Al Qaida leadership, which would like nothing more than to completely destroy the U.S. with a nuclear arsenal. One is tempted to agree with Freud that the commandment, 'love thy neighbor as thyself,' is an unrealistic inflation of love, and impossible to fulfill, because of the limitations of our psychological makeup.³¹

Likewise, as with some of the other religions mentioned above, Christianity seems to also raise questions concerning human rights. The extolling of celibacy over marriage in the New Testament³² seems to militate against, or at least to downgrade, the natural right to reproduce; the stringent prohibition of divorce³³ seems to show extreme intolerance of imperfect human choices; and the recommendation of voluntary poverty³⁴ seems to relegate the fundamental right of private property to a secondary status.

But at this point, we are simply encountering some inevitable limitations connected with the use of a natural-law criterion for the choice of a religion. Natural-law considerations can indeed help with the *negatives*, raising some 'red flags' for the rational seeker about where not to go and what not to accept. Thus, if a religion is proffered to mankind by a prophet, fundamental *sine qua nons* should guide us: at the outset, we should consider whether the ethical characteristics of the prophet favor his credibility or not, and examine whether any publicly observable evidence amounts to God's 'signature' authorizing the prophet. An examination of such criteria is the only defense rational persons have against being hoodwinked by clever and

resourceful pathological liars willing to repeat 'Thus saith the Lord!' over and over again to attain power, wealth and/or sexual prowess. Personal charisma and mesmerizing eloquence (characteristics found to an extraordinary degree in many alleged prophets) are insufficient grounds for religious commitment, unless we are prepared to define religion as essentially irrational.

However, natural law is only minimally helpful in preparing the way for the *positive adoption* of a religion. For example, with reference to Christianity, considerations of natural law and natural rights cannot of themselves precipitate the 'leap of faith' that would be required for embracing with our mind the fact of the Incarnation, or for truly, from the heart, loving our enemy in the sort of extreme situations mentioned above. Something more would be required – 'grace' entering into human life – possibly something like the *potentia obedientialis* that Aquinas posited as an innate ability to be raised from the natural to the supernatural,³⁵ or like the 'implicit Christianity' that Karl Rahner ascribes to 'anonymous Christians.'³⁶ In other words, if an extremely rational philosophical type of person were to examine the various religions in a completely impartial way, with a view to possibly adopting the religion most conformable to natural law and natural rights, he might conclude that Christianity (as evidenced also by the fact that so many Christians were obviously not living up to its high ideals) was not to be chosen, simply because it proposed standards too lofty for human beings – *unless* he were to receive some special divine impetus to get him over this formidable existential hurdle.

Footnotes

¹ Genesis 22:2.

² See S. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II^{ae}, q.94, a. 5

³ *Summa theologiae* II–II^{ae}, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3.

⁴ Deuteronomy 3:2, 7:2–5, 20:16; Numbers 2:34, 3:3; Joshua 6:21, 8:26–28, 11:20; see also I Samuel 15:3, 28:18; 27:9,11; II Samuel 21; I Maccabees 5:5.

⁵ See H. Kainz, 'Biblical Terrorism, with a Platonic Deconstruction,' in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32:1, 1999.

- ⁶ *Book of Mormon*, 1 Nephi 13–14, 22; 2 Nephi 28.
- ⁷ Francisco Salzano, 'The Prehistoric Colonization of the Americas,' in Michael H. Crawford, Ed., *Anthropological Genetics : Theory, Methods and Applications*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 449; Theodore Schurr, 'Tracking Genes Through Time and Space : Changing Perspectives on New World Origins,' in Robson Bonnicksen, *Paleoamerican Origins: beyond Clovis* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), pp. 234–5.
- ⁸ *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake, Utah; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1982), #130:19–22; 131:7–8.
- ⁹ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake, Deseret News Press, 1938), 345.
- ¹⁰ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, (Liverpool : F.D. and S.W. Richards, 1857; fifth photo lithographic reprint of exact original edition, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1967) II, pp. 81–2; IV, pp. 259–60.
- ¹¹ *Doctrine and Covenants* #132:61–62.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, #131–132.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, #112:29, 124:27–34, 128:5, 17–18.
- ¹⁴ Fawn Brodie, in *No Man Knows my History: the Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (NY: Alfred A Knopf, 1971), characterizes the Book of Mormon as 'highly original and imaginative fiction' (p. 48), with elements of plagiarism: the Mormon theory of the Hebraic origin of the American Indians seems to have had as its source Ethan Smith's 1823 book, *View of the Hebrews; or the Ten Tribes of Israel in America* (p. 46); about twenty-five thousand words from the Old Testament (mostly from the chapters of Isaiah mentioned in Ethan Smith's book) were put into the mouth of 'Nephite' prophets, along with about two thousand words from the New Testament (p. 58); stories were borrowed with some alterations from the Bible (p. 63); and hundreds of names were lifted from the Bible, sometimes with minor spelling changes (p. 73).
- ¹⁵ Brodie, in Chapter XXIV, and in Appendix C on 'The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith,' tentatively estimates the number of Smith's 'wives' at 48,

including approximately 12 married women, as well as unmarried women. She adds biographical information about each of the wives. Tod Compton corrects and revises Brodie's 'list' to a total of 33 wives (See *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History*, Newell Bringhurst, ed. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), pp. 154–194). The *New York Herald*, announcing Smith's death at the hands of an angry mob in 1844 referred to him as the 'modern Mohammed.' Sometimes, like Muhammad, Smith told his prospective bride that an angel had directed him to take her as a wife.

¹⁶ *Qur'an* 2:193, 8:39, 9:5, 9:29, 47:4

¹⁷ *Qur'an* 2:228, 4:15, 34

¹⁸ *Qur'an* 2:217, 4:89, 9:12

¹⁹ See Ibn Ishaq's *The Life of Muhammad*, Ibn Hisham trans. (Pakistan branch: Oxford University Press, 1970), summary by Ibn Hisham of *The Apostle's Wives*, pp. 792–798.

²⁰ Ibn Ishaq, p. 792.

²¹ *Qur'an* 33:37–38.

²² *Qur'an* 33:50.

²³ *Qur'an* 4:34

²⁴ Ibn Ishaq, pp. 659–660.

²⁵ *Qur'an* 8:41.

²⁶ *Qur'an* 3:28, 16:106

²⁷ *Qur'an* 2:217.

²⁸ *Qur'an* 2:191, 4:89, 4:91, 5:33–34, 8:12, 9:5, 47:4.

²⁹ Matt. 5:48.

³⁰ Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27, 6:35.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Strachey trans. (NY: Norton, 1961), p. 109.

³² Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7–9.

³³ Mark 10:1; Matt. 5:32, 19:9.

³⁴ Mark 10:21; Matt. 19:21; Luke 18:22.

³⁵ *Summa theologiae* q. 11, a. 1c.

³⁶ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 14, David Bourke transl. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), p 283.