**Monotheistic Spirituality: The Basis for a Shared Sense of Identity and Common Humanity**

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**Key Words**: spiritual, spirituality, religion, religiosity, human soul, spirit, monotheism, reason, transcendence, self-identity, humanity, unity, attributes of God, radicalism, extremism.

**Abstract**

Spirituality, when understood from a monotheistic worldview, is unifying and fulfilling to humanity and endures the test of time and change. The purpose of this paper is bring out the spiritual convergence of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and how that convergence is and should be the basis for their shared sense of identity and common humanity. Emphasis is placed on the one and only God who is the basis for human oneness, and caution raised against undue dependence on mere religiosity and culture to appeal for human oneness.

Through an extensive review of literature on this topic, a definition of spirituality in contrast to religion is provided. Reason and God’s self-revelation are presented as the basis for monotheistic spirituality of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The final part of the paper looks at God’s attributes as the basis for human morality, righteousness, justice, and goodness. These are the spiritual values that unite humanity and which would help religious and other community leaders worldwide to address the challenge of social, political, and religious radicalism and extremism which are in themselves expressions of emptiness and desperation of the human soul.

**Introduction**

We are living at a time when the world is experiencing unprecedented turmoil due to political instability, religious rivalry, racial discrimination, and ethnic mistrust as well as corruption in high places, injustice and lawlessness. It feels like a dark cloud is hovering over humanity and, the more we try to wish it away, the more its reality confronts us. There is a growing restlessness, rejection, and rebellion against the philosophical and religious ideals of the past and a shift of focus not only on human rights, but animal rights as well worship of nature, and the rights of individuals to pervert traditional morality and religious beliefs (Adam, 2000). Poe (2004) calls this the age of post-modernity which “focuses on the individual, unrestrained by custom, religion, culture, community or consequence to the whole” (Poe, 2004, 73).

The mistrust of traditional beliefs and values as well as the rebellion against authority has led to social, political, and religious radicalism and extremism both of which are a threat to world peace and stability. But in our search for solutions to these challenges of our times, we try to look at every corner, yet it appears like we just keep going in circles. This is because there is a critical area we do not seem to look keenly enough. This is the area of human spirituality.

Human beings are spiritual by nature and all our values, morality, and aspirations revolve around our spirituality and not so much on our religions, culture, or even our conventional national values and aspirations. The spiritual nature is not a creation of religion. It is an inherent aspect our humanity that draws us to religion and not the other way round. It is this spiritual nature in us that moves us to seek answers to the ultimate questions of who we are and what we aspire to become. If it is ignored or its significance down-played in preference to religion, then we fail to touch the inner soul yearning for significance and meaning which, when unfulfilled, breeds radicalism and extremism, which are expressions of emptiness and desperation of the human soul.

Spirituality, when understood from a monotheistic worldview, is unifying and fulfilling to humanity and endures the test of time and change. The purpose of this paper is bring out the spiritual convergence of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and how that convergence is and should be the basis for their shared sense of identity and common humanity. Emphasis is placed on the one and only God who is the basis for human oneness and caution raised against undue dependence on mere religion and culture to appeal for human oneness.

A definition of spirituality in contrast to religion is provided. Reason and God’s self-revelation are presented as the basis for monotheistic spirituality of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The final part of the paper looks at God’s attributes as the basis for human morality, righteousness, justice, and goodness. These are the spiritual values that unite humanity.

**Spirituality and Religion**

Many definitions of spirituality exist, but in this paper, an attempt is made to understand it from a monotheistic perspective. Greater emphasis also deliberately placed on spirituality rather than religion because the two are indeed different constructs even though not necessarily mutually exclusive. Religion in this paper is defined as the organized and collective expression of people’s spirituality through a collection of beliefs, artifacts, and institutions that facilitate their worship of God and moral expressions. On the other hand, spirituality is defined as “one’s personal relation to the sacred or transcendent, a relation that then informs other relationships and the meaning of one’s own life” (Sinnott, 2002, p. 199).

Going by this definition, it is reasonable to maintain that human spirituality is the basis for personal identity and the view of self and consequently, the nature of our spirituality gives meaning to all our human relationships and expressions. It is that spirituality, rather than religion, that determines who we are and how we relate to one another. Spirituality is about who were are before God and before our other fellow humans. On the hand, religion is about how we express our spirituality and a person does not need to be spiritual in order to identify with a given religion and to engage in religious activities. There are many people whose devotion to their religion is unquestionable, but they never taken time to personally reflect deeply on the matters of spirituality.

Spirituality is about God and unifying but religions and culture reflect our human creativeness and expressiveness as we relate with God and with one another. As such they give us a sense of pride and accomplishment which in turn lead us to competitiveness and divisiveness. There is hardly any unity across religions and different cultures, but when God becomes the center of focus, we quickly discover that what unites us is greater than that which divides us.

**Spirituality, Reason and Search for Personal Meaning and Fulfillment**

The ability to reason and reflect on the nature of life makes human beings different from animals that operate and respond to their environment primarily by instinct. Human beings strive to know who they are and how they relate to the rest of what there is in the universe, the visible and the invisible. They ask themselves questions of meaning of life, reality, the universe and their place in it. Every culture, whether African, Western, or Eastern, seeks to provide answers to these questions, and every attempt to do so brings about a unique brand of answers. But since the questions asked are generally similar, a number of the answers crafted in different religions and cultures overlap in many ways.

This search for ultimate meaning of life is itself inherent in human nature. The non-material part of human beings, which is the soul-spirit, is immortal and forms the animating essence in life as well as the energizing component that serves as the interactive link with other spiritual beings. Through the mind, the soul-spirit is functionally linked to the body but it is the soul-spirit that is capable of subjective awareness, reason and intentionality (Musyoka, 2015). It is therefore within the human soul-spirit that a person is capable of having an inner realization that the Sacred transcends the self and that there exists values independent of the self. Thus, the soul-spirit relationship with the Sacred and submission to that Ultimate Reality is more than just a matter of personal choice. Hence being spiritual is not an option but more of an integral part of the human nature.

Spirituality is more of a personal nature and should not be confused with religion. Rican (2004) points out that:

Phenomena previously termed simply "religious" are now being divided into two classes, religious and spiritual. Although an overlap between the two is generally recognized, the class of religious phenomena is becoming narrower. . . . Religion is primarily characterized by its traditional forms, rituals, institutions and orthodox teachings, uninspired rigidity, lack of feeling, obsolescence, reactionary attitude, moralizing, etc. In contrast, spirituality has come to mean something new, interesting, spontaneous, informal, creative, and universal. In practice spirituality appears as authentic inner experience, freedom of individual expression, seeking, or even religious experimentation (Rican, 2004, 136).

Zinnabauer & Pargament (2005) add that “spirituality is a search for the sacred,…the heart and soul of religiousness” (p. 36). But the main distinctiveness between the two lies in that the former is an inherent quality of the human soul while religion is its outward expression. Thus spirituality creates religion and not necessarily the other way round.

By contrast, religion serves to meet common human needs some of which are not spiritual by their nature but social, cultural, and psychological. Religion provides a sense of well-being, community identification and a sense of belonging to a community of faith in a way that is not necessarily spiritual. There are many people who identify with a religion and participate in religious activities without thinking and reflecting on their relationship with God and, their allegiance is more to their religion and community culture than to God. In reality, such people may be considered to be either practical atheists who live as if God does not exist or deists who believe that God is the Creator of the universe but does not intervene in any way to shape its destiny.

MacDonald (2009) points out that spirituality and religion are interrelated but spirituality differentiates itself as “the extent to which a person experiences and acknowledges the reality of the numinous or transcendent either or both as something that exists separately from the person and/or aids the person in ascribing meaning to existence” (p. 87). A more recent literature review on the subject of spirituality and religion by Cruz-Ortega (2013) confirms that this train of thought has continued to gain momentum among many scholars whose varied definitions of spirituality seem to converge on “a solitary, personal, and subjective experience of what the individual considers as sacred or ultimate” (p. 23).

**Roots of Monotheistic Spirituality**

There are basically three main monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although these three are different religions, they have common roots and a shared belief that there exists one personal God who is both transcendent and immanent. In fact, it is this shared foundation on which these three religions are build, and their individual and community spirituality is defined by that foundation.

We still need to acknowledge that the outward expressions of some of their subsequent beliefs and religious practices are different. In fact, there are irreconcilable differences between the Unitarian Monotheism of Judaism and Islam in one hand and Trinitarian Monotheism of Christianity and these differences revolve around the Person of Jesus Christ. But in spite of this, there is a spiritual convergence that is and should be the basis for their shared sense of identity and common humanity. Their monotheistic spirituality predisposes believers in there three religions to look at the world and interact with one another from the perspective, values, and intentions of their belief in one Creator and Sovereign Lord.

Monotheistic spirituality is founded on the belief in one Supreme, Omnipotent, and Omniscient God, who is separate from the Universe because He is its Creator. This Sovereign God has not abandoned His creation and continues to rule it with power and wisdom. History is a manifestation of His divine will and working and all His purposes for the creation will come to pass.

However, to believe in God’s existence is intuitive and universal. The concept of God has existed since antiquity. There is no time in the existence of humanity when the “god” concept has not been in existence. The general term “god” in English has the same mean as *theos* in Greek*, deus* in Latin or *Elohim* in Hebrew. Every language and culture has a term that may be translated as “god” which broadly implies any class of deity, including idols and spirits (Thiessen, 1977, p. 24). Through power encounters and ranking in accordance with human experiences, some “gods” may be described as higher, mighty, or even almighty. But this does not necessarily capture monotheistic concept of God as represented in the three religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This universal pre-occupation with the existence of God and the human effort to conceptualize His nature and attributes arise out of the fact that human beings are spiritual and reasonable by nature. It is more logical, reasonable and natural to believe in the existence of God than otherwise, and as Moreland and Craig (2003) put it, “God’s nonexistence is logically impossible…God is not merely factually necessary, but *logically necessary* in his being” (p. 502).

Ancient Greek and western philosophers have over the centuries had diverse views of God some of which include: “the eternal mind”, “the cause of good in nature”, “the first ground of all being”, “the real Cause of all and every existence”, “a being who has all rights and no duties”, “the absolute spirit, yet a spirit without consciousness until it becomes conscious in the reason and thoughts of man”, or “that creative Force, behind and in the universe, who manifests himself as energy, as life, as order, as beauty, as thought, as conscience, as love” (Thiessen, 1977, 24).

But human reason and philosophical speculation alone cannot provide a full understanding of who God is. Mere human effort to understand God has tended to portray Him as basically impersonal and part of nature, the uncaused Cause of nature and reality. By mere reason and human effort, there cannot really be a right or wrong view of God when the basis of truth is the subjective individual human experience and interpretation of reality. With such a subjectivity and relativism, there cannot then be a unifying Truth that can serve as a basis for a shared sense identity, destiny or unity among people of different races, ethnic groups, religions or cultures. Even though humans attempt to find a common ground on which they can forge unity on the basis of their common physical needs, aspirations, and concerns, these never really converge when they seem to do so, such a convergence is just remain subjective and a matter of personal opinion.

However, monotheistic spirituality, which may also be referred to as spiritual worldview, is based on both reason and God’s self-revelation. Since God is a personal Being, He is capable of revealing Himself and interacting with His creation as He wills. In the Old Testament of the Bible, God revealed Himself to Moses as *Yahweh*, ‘the self-existent one’ or ‘one who causes to be’, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In His subsequent interactions with people, He revealed Himself as *Jehovah-Jireh*, the Lord will provide, *Jehovah-Rapha,* the Lord that heals, *Jehovah-Nissi*, the Lord our banner, *Jehovah-Shalom*, the Lord our peace, *Jehovah-Raah*, the Lord my shepherd, *Jehovah-Tsidkenu*, the Lord our righteousness, and *Jehovah-Shammah*, the Lord who is present. Over the years of theological reflection, Christian theologians have tended to converge in their conceptualization of God as “infinite and perfect Spirit in whom all things have their source, support and end” (Thiessen, 1977, 25). This is a revelation of His personal and relational nature.

In the first five Books of the Bible, often referred to as the *Torah* or the *Pentateuch*, God is revealed as the Creator of the Universe, and He alone is to be worshipped. His self-revelation to Abraham, Moses and a host of prophets came when there were many other “gods” of which He repeatedly demonstrated through mighty deeds and miracles, that they were not gods at all. But since every group of people and culture had their own version of ‘gods’, the descendants of Abraham too got trapped into the misconception that the God of their father Abraham was their God alone just as the other ethnic groups and nations had their own gods. Oftentimes when *Jehovah* would seem to be too far from them, they would turn to the gods of other nations to see if in them they could find what their God did not seem to provide at the time. They would engage in idol worship from time to time, until finally God dispersed them among the nations as a way of curing them from that spirit of idolatry.

The Israelites did not quite understand that God’s original plan in His self-revelation to Abraham was to reach out to all the nations of the world through his offspring whom God designated as a nation with priesthood responsibilities to the world (Gen. 12:1-4; Exodus 19:5-6). But them, the general understanding was that *Jehovah* was their God who was strong enough to protect their personal interests as a nation and who did not really need to bother about other nations. Even when Jesus Christ came, His Jewish disciples asked Him whether now the time had come for Him to restore the Kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6).

The greatest tragedy in human history has been the thinking that God exists primarily to serve their interests, cultures or religions. People despise others who do not belong to their group, denomination, religion, or culture. Our human religious innovations and cultural heritage take the first place in our hearts and God comes second, if at all He features anywhere in our minds even though His name is always on our lips. We treasure our religious institutions and cultural practices because they are the creation of our ingenuity, and we submit ourselves to the authority of those who lead us more than we would submit ourselves to our Creator. This is not monotheistic spirituality; it is idolatry which is what causes fights and disagreements amongst us.

**The Nature of Monotheistic Spirituality: God’s Attributes**

Spirituality is informed and shaped by a person’s concept of God. Atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, dualism, deism or polytheism, are all belief systems that shape spirituality. But monotheism nurtures a unique brand of spirituality that revolves around the attributes of one Supreme God who alone is the Creator and the Lord of the Universe. Those attributes dictate how we relate with Him as well as other beings and the rest of His creation. The attributes of God are not a creation of any religion; they are about who He is and this does not depend on what we think or what we believe He is.

To talk about the attributes of God is of course to presume His existence, for God is not an idea or a personification of an idea, in which case we would not talk about His attributes. Ideas have no impact on reality; only the people who hold them do and, *since God is not an idea, He exists independently of what we believe about Him*. As said earlier we do not create God’s attributes; we experience them. However, to some extent, our conceptualization of those attributes depends on how we have experienced God personally, culturally, and historically.

When it comes to our conceptualization of God’s attributes, as Thiessen (1977) puts it, “They are to be thought of as objectively real, not merely as man’s subjective mode of conceiving God, and as descriptions of the particular ways in which the divine essence exists and operates, not as denoting distinct parts of God” (Thiessen, 1977, 79-80). But when we look at the general categories of God’s attributes, there are those that are descriptive of His immanence, who He is, regardless of who we think He is and those attributes that are transitive or those which He has chosen to reveal to humanity through His interaction with nature.

**God’s Attributes of Immanence**

**Omnipresence**

This is the attribute of being everywhere at once, and again as Thiessen (1977) puts it, this is “not a necessary part of his being, but is a free act of his will. If God should will to destroy the universe, his omnipresence would cease, but he himself would not cease to be” (p. 80). God is transcendent and not subject to His creation; He watches over all and His presence cannot be limited by physical, moral, or spiritual barriers erected intentionally or unintentionally by His creation. There is no religion or culture or human institution that can keep away God from reaching out to His creation. He does not need permission to be where He wants to be or to interact with whomever He chooses to engage. God is never far from any individual persons and those seek Him can find Him.

**Omniscience**

This refers to His infinite knowledge, past, present, and future, actual and possible. God knows Himself perfectly and He know His creation perfectly. To deny God’s omniscience is to deny design and intelligence in creation, a kind of thinking that runs contrary to reason and science. God’s omniscience also means that the final authority in knowing who He, the nature of His creation, and what truth is depends on Him. He is the final authority on what is Truth.

What is visible and subject to scientific observation and experimentation gives us data that we can seek to interpret, and our interpretation can be right or wrong. But knowledge of the invisible and non-material, can only reach us through His self-revelation. Human beings are not omniscient and they must come to grips with the reality that their knowledge is limited. This requires humility and intellectual honesty which is a characteristic mark of a spiritual person.

**Omnipotence**

Omnipotence means God is all-powerful and able to do whatever is consistent with His nature and will. He has no limitation or obligation outside of Himself to do or not to do anything. Thus what He wills to do, He does, what He says He will do, He will do. While this is the greatest source of comfort to humanity, it also the humanity’s source consternation. It provides comfort to know that God is able and will do what He promised; the world will not become what He does not intend it to become; and He does not need any assistance to accomplish His purposes. Human beings do not need to help God to do His work but in their submissiveness to Him, He can choose to use them to accomplish His intentions.

**Immutability**

Immutability means that God is unchanging and unchangeable. There is nothing better for Him to change to and cannot become less than what and who He is. Thiessen (1977) captures this idea of God’s immutability very well when he says, “That which exists uncaused, by the necessity of its nature, must exist as it does….Neither improvement nor deterioration is possible” (p. 83). However God’s immutability should not be construed to mean inflexibility, indifference or rigidity in His dealings with nature or humanity. For example God answers prayer; that does not mean He becomes more powerful, more loving, more merciful, or more generous when we pray. In His wisdom in dealing with humanity, there are things He does or gives to us even when we do not pray but there are others He has chosen to do or give to those who pray.

**Transitive attributes of God**

Transitive attributes of God are oftentimes referred to as moral attributes as far as they describe God’s dealings with His creation and specifically humanity. Three of them are highlighted below.

**Holiness**

Holiness refers to the perfect consistency and conformity of God’s being to His will. He does not will that which is inconsistent with the nature of His being and only He alone is so holy. Holiness may however be attributed to any of His creation that is dedicated to or set apart for His exclusive use or service. Any person who sets himself or herself to seek and do God’s will is holy. In monotheistic spirituality or worldview, holiness is the responsibility of an individual; a person cannot be holy on behalf of another and neither can a person force another to be holy. This is because it arises and operates at the level of intentionality in the human soul. Outward actions do not, in themselves, make a person holy. It is therefore futile to attempt to coerce a person to convert to a given faith; only persuasiveness leads to a change of heart.

**Righteousness and Justice**

Righteousness and justice are two inseparable terms and both represent an expression of God’s holiness in His relationship and treatment of the creation. Where there is righteousness and justice, there is perfect conformity to the nature of God’s being and His will. There is no partiality, unfairness, or inconsistency in the way God relates to and with His creation. Thus the basis for righteousness and justice is the nature of God’s being and His will. Without God, these two terms become relative with no absolute standard for human beings to follow. By nature, human beings know when they are doing right and when they are doing wrong. They also know when they are doing injustice to others. However, in order to appease their conscience, they may find something or someone to justify their actions. But any such reference that is outside God’s righteousness and justice amount to self-deception.

**Goodness**

Good is an attribute of God which refers to the perfect blend of His love, benevolence, mercy, and grace that He extends to His creation (Thiessen, 1977, 85-87). It is in this sense of goodness that Jesus said in Mark 10:18 that only God is good. Human beings can be good to one another, to some extent, but they cannot, in the strict sense of the word, talk about being good to God. Realistically and humanly speaking, good people are those who seek to know God and have resolved to submit their will to His. They are therefore able to be good to one another but they have nothing they can offer to God to show their goodness to Him. Human beings cannot show mercy to God; and neither can they extend benevolence or grace to Him. To love God is to respond in gratitude to His love. A spiritual person is one who has a heart of gratitude and gives thanks to God for all things and for all people regardless of who they are.

**Conclusion**

When all is said and done, it boils down to one destiny question: do we want to elevate our religions and denominations above spirituality or should we point men and women to their Creator so that they may find personal fulfilment in knowing and serving Him? The pursuit for spiritual meaning is inherent in our human nature which is also a foundational component of our personal identity and understanding of the self as Poll & Smith (2003) point out:

Individuals form their identity based on their own unique history and beliefs about who they are and who they should become over time. Paralleling this process, we suggest that *individuals will strive to develop a spiritual* *identity that corresponds with what they believe* *God to be* (Poll & Smith, 2003, p. 134).

A spiritual person is the one who has discovered who he is in relation to God and the rest of God’s creation and makes a commitment to lead a life that is consistent with that discovery. This is not an event but a journey filled with experiences that require a deep reflection on life in humility and guarded by intellectual honesty as character quality. What emerges from such a spiritual journey is a kind of faith that rests on values and aspirations that transcend the self, one’s ethnicity, or religious affiliations. The person begins to see the world as God sees it and begins to value what God values, including his fellow human beings, without being judgmental or prejudiced. This is what a monotheistic worldview is.

However, our human tendency is to focus more on our versions of religions and our religious institutions rather than the spiritual values and aspirations that point us to God. We take pride in our religiosity rather than our spirituality and this only serves to inflate our collective ego and to promote a spirit of competitiveness and rivalry. But we have the option to humbly confront the futility of our religiosity and to engage in personal spiritual reflection and critical interrogation of our beliefs and practices, with an attitude of intellectual honesty, so that we may discover how much we have in common and how much there is of that which unites us than that which causes divisions amongst us.

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