

Some Irksome Theological Questions for 2016 A.D.

Picture this familiar image: A Christian soccer player who just scored a goal suddenly gets down on one knee, makes the sign of the cross on his face and points up to the sky. He's presumably attributing his success to God. A few minutes later, another Christian player from the opposite team scores his goal and then reproduces the same behavior as his rival. Question: Can God favor both rival teams at the same time? Is the first player blind to the achievement of his rival? I believe these are valid theological questions.

Here's another: We learn in that ancient Hindu religious text, *The Bhagavad Gita*, that when Lord Arjuna dropped his weapons and refused to fight his clan relatives at the legendary battle of Kurukshetra, the god Vishnu, in his avatar Lord Kṛṣṇa, exhorted him to get back on his chariot, pick up his weapons and fight –as was his caste duty as a kshatriya. Now, presumably his cousins on the opposite side of the battlefield were also devout warriors who worshiped the same god Vishnu, and assumed that said god was also on their side in the battle. So, did Vishnu support both sides of the same war? This, I also believe, is a valid theological question.

We recently saw a serious confrontation arise between two sects of Islam when a Shi'I cleric was executed in Saudi Arabia –a nation run by a Sunni theocracy– provoking murderous rage in Iran and other neighboring countries with Shi'I majorities. This bloody rivalry goes back to the very start of Islam, though both claim to truly represent the teachings of the Al Qur'an and of the Prophet of Allah. So, though not a Muslim, I think I'm entitled to ask: How can Allah support two sects of the same religion, even when they go to war against each other? Surely, this is also a valid theological question.

Of course, this can also be asked of the various rival Christian sects that went to horrific and genocidal wars back in the 16th and 17th centuries. True, the principles of religious tolerance have prevailed in the West since then. But why didn't these bitter enemies stop at the time to ask similar valid theological questions, such as: How can the Lord Jesus Christ sanction both Roman Catholic and Protestant armies as true Christian soldiers at the same time?

Certainly, many more examples can be found in history and in contemporary events which leave believers baffled and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, I'm going to try to address some of these irksome theological questions.

First of all, God does not give a rodent's anus who wins a soccer match, even in the FIFA World Cup finals.

Second, maybe Arjuna was right to drop his weapons, sit and watch the battle, and tell Kṛṣṇa to mind his own business. After all, he was only his charioteer.

Third, we read in the Qur'an's telling of the story of Cain and Abel that Abel tells Cain: "*If thou dost stretch thy hand against me to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against thee to slay thee: for I do fear Allah.*" (Surah Al-Ma'ida 5:28). This has been interpreted to mean: Don't strike the first blow against your rival –a softer but effective version of the 6th Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

Fourth, the fratricidal Christian wars of previous centuries were never sanctioned by God in any of His Persons. Nowhere in the Gospels do we hear Jesus say: "Slay all those who believeth not in Me." but rather "Blessed be the Peacemakers..."

The European thinkers of the 19th century rejected the abstruse arguments of the Scholastics and Christian apologists for war, plunder and genocide, opting for non-religious foundations for their enlightened speculations. However, in time they came back to condoning war. Hegel, for example, rooted conflict at the very center of all dynamic evolutions of the Spirit; while Darwin unwittingly gave us the rationale for all human struggles for supremacy until today. The horrors of the last century are proof enough that these thinkers helped us stand our colossus on philosophical clay feet. Very few outstanding individuals veered from the path of violence to teach and practice forbearance and compassion as well as to devote their lives to non-violent methods of social change.

For those of you who may think I'm a naïf dreamer, I point to the example of those few real heroes who achieved their goals in the 20th century while both talked and walked the path of non-violence. Individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela were all deeply-committed to their respective faiths while being exemplars of tolerance to rivals and enemies alike.

And if I were God, surely only this kind of human being I would always favor with my goodness and my grace.