

## Sixth Thesis

*Whatever God is, God is unique in divinity.*

*That is to say, I don't really think there are multiple gods or goddesses – just varying interpretations of our experiences of the divine.*

It seems hard to me to justify the belief I hear so many conservative Christians publicly espouse that the Christian God is real and Allah is a false god. I've tried to argue with some of these folks that God is God is God and what you call God really doesn't signify in the least. But they continue to insist that what Muslims call Allah isn't really a god – and certainly isn't "God". Not the God we Christians worship. No holy way.

In my more facile moments, I sarcastically postulate that my conservative acquaintances can't make this leap because, after all, our "God" is an old white man with a long white beard and ice blue eyes and this Allah chap is rather swarthy, has dark brown eyes and sports a thick black mustache. Although to be fair, they do dress very similarly.

Of course, no neo-con Christian worth his salt (I use the masculine pronoun because of my assumption that the women wouldn't be allowed to express an opinion) would agree to the articulation I state above. All but the thickest among us have learned enough not to express religious prejudices as racial prejudices. Not that many aren't willing to express their racial prejudices – but I think even fundamentalists have come to believe that maybe God doesn't exactly like that sort of thing (even if God loves the fair best).

I think there may be two problems:

- First, my conservative friends are not really monotheists at heart.
- Second, my conservative buds place more value on theory than praxis.

### *Polytheism*

Most conservatives I know believe in at least one other divine being besides the Trinity (to the extent they can understand the Trinity which, I wager, is very little). Virtually all of them believe in an evil divinity they call the Devil *inter alia*. Conservative Christians (other than the likes of Warren and Osteen – but maybe not Osteen's stewardess pushing wife) seem to spend a lot more time talking about the Devil than God. The Devil tempts us. The Devil is waiting for just the right minute to tempt you into evil. The Devil is happy when you stay home and watch Face the Nation and skip church.

Now, none of them is going to confess that they think the Devil is divine. But everything they say about the Devil is an attribute of divinity. The Devil is eternal (how else will he torture the damned for eternity?). The Devil is omnipresent (tempting us). The Devil is omniscient (always knows when we're ripe for temptation). The only one of the big three that the Devil misses is omnipotence and that only by a small portion. Conservatives will assure us that there is no real contest and that God will prevail – but they constantly portray the universe as being in a constant state of war between good/God and evil/Devil. God and the Devil tussle and struggle and God

will, definitely, *eventually* prevail overall. The distressing part of this view of existence is that God and the Devil also fight over our souls and God often loses that battle. Of course, that's our fault because it ends up being entirely within our control (not God's, somehow) and we end up deciding (or so I'm told) between God and the Devil. How the conservative mind deals with the cognitive dissonance created by a system in which any fully (or even adequately) informed individual could choose the Devil over God ... well, I just can't explain that.

So. Most conservatives are not monotheists in my experience. And because they admit the existence of another divinity, albeit a minor divinity, I think deep down they think of Allah (and Krishna, etc.) as being like the Devil: minor deities over whom God exercises dominion and over whom God will eventually triumph. (It all sounds like a basketball game on Tivo to me – you may already know the outcome but the game can still be exciting to watch.) And because Allah et al. are separately existing gods, they couldn't really be just other understandings of the same deity western Christians think of as God. Could they?

### *Theory vs. Praxis*

I believe that there was a long period of time in the history of Christianity when Christians placed more emphasis on praxis than theory. That is to say, it used to matter more how you lived than what you believed. But those times appear to be gone, at least for now. I would go so far as to posit that Jesus cared more about how people lived than what they believed. When Jesus was having his little tête-à-tête with the “woman taken in adultery” (how does one go about getting a title like that?) he asks her where the folks were who condemned her. They had evaporated. Then he tells her what? To go and believe the right things? No. He tells her to go and sin no more. He tells her to go and not to turn away again from God. He doesn't discuss belief with her at all. He doesn't ask her to **A**cept, **B**elieve and **C**onfess. She does none of those things. And yet he manages to love her, doesn't he?

Take the example of the monasteries. The Benedictine rule, for example, does not set forth a theoretical belief system to which all monks and nuns must adhere. The rule is a way of life. It sets forth in excruciating detail how the brothers and sisters were to live their collective lives within the confines of the cloister. Observing the Stations of the Cross was not a belief – it was an act of devotion.

Worship used to be an act. “Liturgy” means work – not thought. It comes from a Greek word meaning “public work”, not “common belief”. Now worship appears to be a time when most Christians gather to share their certainties, to indoctrinate their children and to condemn those who do not understand and adhere to their correct beliefs. To the extent worship is not a teaching moment, it is widely viewed as a time people come to church in order for God to do something for them. Church has become a spiritual filling station where people come to get fueled up for the coming week but where they leave nothing of themselves as a worship gift for God. But I digress. As usual.

It is my observation that the exclusive focus of conservative Christians on theory, that is, on right belief, is one of the reasons that they cannot accept that Allah and other named deities are just different cultural encounters with the only Deity. Allah is the front leg of the elephant. Krishna

is the trunk. Yahweh is the brick wall flank. But they are all still an elephant; the elephant. But conservative Christians appear to agree (with each other) that God is what you believe about God. They believe that God exists in three personages: Father, Son, Holy Ghost. If you don't believe that then you are not believing in God. They believe that the Bible is the word of God (a position, I point out, that isn't even orthodox). If you read the Quran then what you think of as Allah is, at best, a demon.

### *Monotheism*

I am a monotheist. I believe that there is only one God. I don't believe in the existence of a Zoroastrian evil divinity clashing with the God in the White Hat. That is to say, I don't believe in a devil (although, if there is one, I'm pretty sure she was a member of a church I worked at once). Because I only believe in God and not the devil, I don't believe in hell. I may have covered this in another article, but it seems pretty clear to me that God would not, could not eternally torture God's children.

I don't believe that it is necessary to believe that God is only one thing. So it doesn't diminish my joy to accept the possibility that all of the concepts of the divine in human history are the efforts of the believers to explain their experience of the divine. That expression of experience is clearly affected by the development, the geography, the health and welfare of the person trying to give words to the ineffable.

I don't think that God is arbitrary enough to grant me eternal torture for guessing wrong, or for being born in the wrong culture, for that matter. If I had been born to a devout Shinto couple, would God cast me into Gehenna (doesn't that sound like a hair treatment?) forever because I didn't figure out that I had to convert to avoid that punishment? If God is that arbitrary, then it seems to me that your beliefs still don't matter, because even if you get it right, God would be likely to change the rules after it was too late for you to make a different play. That God is the one who, after you just drew your last card to make four of a kind, would slam his cards on the table and yell Gin! And then slowly roast you through all eternity for losing at Rummy when you thought you were playing Texas Hold 'em.

So I guess that God is God is God and that even if I don't understand much about God it doesn't matter because either God is good and God will love me in spite of my failures, or God is bad and I stand no chance. Either way I am left with behaving as I see fit given my circumstances and understandings at any particular time.

And I guess that if there's a twin of me out there somewhere who was brought up in another religious tradition, then God loves him just as much as God loves me. I guess that God doesn't care what appellation that twin uses when he prays. I guess that God is God is God.