

My God's Bigger than Your God

A Response to "How We Use God: Let Me Count the Ways"
by Carl Jech

John W. Bennison

Let's begin with two quotes, as examples. Bear in mind, this is *not* a political commentary, but a response to Carl Jech's article in *The Fourth R* 33-4 (July-August 2020) and a critique of how we use one particular three-letter word.

Take away your guns, take away your Second Amendment. No religion, no anything. Hurt the Bible. Hurt God. He's against God. He's against guns. He's against energy.
(US President Donald Trump, referring to his political opponent, August 6, 2020)

At that moment one of those with Jesus lifted his hand, drew his sword, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus says to him, "Put your sword back where it belongs. For everyone who takes up the sword will be done in by the sword. Or do you suppose I am not able to call on my Father, who would put more than twelve legions of heavenly messengers at my disposal?"
(Matt 26:51-53)

When Donald Trump employed the word *god* in the above political rant, he was invoking one notion of that word, with the assumption, I suspect, that his was a universally shared and singular understanding of what that word implied and meant.

But the gospel writer who, according to most modern biblical scholars, placed those words in the second quotation into the mouth of his characterization of a first-century Galilean sage known as Jesus of Nazareth had a very different *god* in mind.

Based on his habitual behavior that seems readily apparent to anyone, it would not be too far-fetched to believe Donald Trump would preposterously declare his *god* as the biggest and best. Ever.

On the other hand, the gospel writer's apologetic about why *his* Jesus would not have invoked his divine "Father" to spare him, as a human father would his only son, speaks to

a very different notion of a *god*. And all the while using the same word.

So, one might well ask, whose *god* is bigger and better?

But hold on a minute. One might better ask, what kind of *god* does each one of us concoct, with the capacity our own human imagination affords us, and for what purpose? Carl Jech points out in his article, "We now have a better understanding of how the portraits of both God and Jesus evolved in the imaginations of subsequent creative storytellers." But he also makes the observation:

While huge majorities of people around the world are likely to say they believe in God, they are also all over the map when defining God—inevitably provoking the critique that when a word can mean almost anything it also risks becoming virtually meaningless. (p. 4)

Yes.

Even within the one religious tradition I've explored my whole life, the Christian faith tradition, there are many

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different Jesus characters portrayed, as we continue in search of what is sometimes referred to as the authentic, historical one. Similarly, the same could be said of the *god* figure variously described in the full breadth of the canon of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. If monotheism was intended to reduce a whole pantheon of gods to one singular divine entity, it has failed to provide a uniformly consistent

description. I therefore suggest that the term "*monotheism*" is a misnomer.

Equally so, Jech's article explores not only how entrenched the word *god* is in our own historical/cultural mindset, but also how it is so varied in its use as to raise the question of its usefulness in the postmodern age we are now experiencing.

To some degree, I resonate with the author's referring to the idea of *god* as more symbol than name, and

more verb than noun. It is reminiscent of the line in one of Rainer Maria Rilke's poems that suggests a metaphor in motion: "God is a direction given to love; not its object."¹ Employing the term symbolically, Jech suggests the best use of the word might be akin to the language of philosophical poets. The term to which he refers, "theo-poetics," is not unlike what Henri Frankfort referred to in his formative 1946 book, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, as "mythopoeic" language.

Jech also repeats several times the idea that *God* represents the best of our humanistic beliefs and values about "distributive economic justice, compassion, empathy, gratitude." And he reiterates the assertion that we have, in the words of Gordon D. Kaufman, created the term *God* "as a reference point for understanding everything" (p. 3).

But while Jech repeatedly attempts to liberate us from the historical mind trap and stereotype of a *god* image, he seems to alternate between capitalizing the word "God" throughout most of the article and referring to other "gods" when talking about their portrayal of our own "human attributes and flaws." Why? He accepts the value-laden synonyms he attributes to "God." Why speak of the "Ground of All Being" or "One Divine Supreme Being"? Does capitalizing such words in our humanly-invented vocabulary elevate them to a height of divine adoration of separateness? After all, the capacity of the human imagination's ability to construct such a lofty notion still originates in the minds of those with mortal feet of clay.

I readily agree with Jech that "we create God by contemplating our greatest human attributes and projecting them onto the universe" (p. 4). But I would also add the cautionary reminder that we project our worst human attributes as well. Just reread the first quotation with which I began this brief commentary. If nothing else, throughout human history the entire pantheon of our invented gods has resulted in a vast compendium of stories about mythic battles of my god waging war on your god, for power and

1. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, (Penguin Classics, 2009), 160.

Carl Jech Responds

Carl Jech

TI endorse most everything John Bennison writes in his thoughtful response to my article on the many ways in which we use the word "God/god." Although historically significant, whether the first letter is capitalized nowadays may not be particularly important. My view was and is that the use of the word *God* is not going away any

dominance. It has been little more than a mirror reflection of our own human story.

For decades I've followed the work of the Westar Institute from its beginning with Bob Funk and the Jesus Seminar right on through to the explorations of the God Seminar and the "future" of this word. I suggest that the use of the word *god* itself has utterly outgrown any productive usefulness. It only separates us between the way you might use the word, and the manner in which I might try to wield it. And it is why I've dubbed myself a post-theist.

I suggest it would be far better to simply take all those synonyms we might use to explain—or explain away—what has become such a useless word by its own redundancy, and leave it at that. Love is love. Mercy is mercy. Justice is justice, plain and simple. Compassion and forgiveness in the human experience is sufficiently redemptive, without projecting some divine "other" beyond the human heart.

As an enlightening example, take the well-known gospel parables like the Good Samaritan or Prodigal Son. They hold within them an inherent power to transform any listener. And they can be more than sufficiently told and retold, without invoking any mention of the three-letter word *god*.

In his insightful article, Jech relates the wonderful story from the Jain religion as told by Gordon Kaufman about the child who asks their mother, "Who made God?" "God has just always existed," the mother answers. The child asks, "If God just exists, why can't the world just exist?"

To which I would add to the child's rhetorical question this follow-up: Why can't we just exist in this world without the problematic and hostile, humanly-devised and warring word, *god*? **4R**



John Bennison (Rel.D, Claremont School of Theology) served as an Episcopal priest and parish pastor for over twenty-five years. For the last fifteen years he has led a progressive, non-denominational faith community, posting commentaries to engage others in meaningful dialogue (wordsnways.com).