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Who or What Is Our God?

The First Word

“You shall have no other gods but me.”

OR

“You won’t need any other gods besides me.”

Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7

Related texts: Isaiah 44:1–2, 6–8, 21–23; John 10:11–16

THEOLOGICAL COMMENTS

THE VERB IS NOT an indicative (“you *have*”), but an imperative (“you *shall have*”). Yet in light of the introduction to the “ten words,” which emphasizes that God has liberated God’s people from slavery, we may also read: because God has set his people free, therefore “you *will have* no other gods” or “you *won’t need* any other gods besides me.” That gives to this “word” the dimension of being “a declaration of theological emancipation.”¹

The Hebrew “but me” or “besides me” is very difficult to capture in English. Attempts include: “before me,” “before my face,” “over against me.” The intention is clear. For the followers of Yahweh, he is the all-encompassing deity. Worshipers of Yahweh cannot divide their loyalty.

“*No other gods.*” The decalogue took shape in a world of many deities. We know the stories where other gods, like Molech (Lev 20), Dagon, the god of the Philistines (1 Sam 5:1–7), Baal, a deity of many faces (1 Kgs 18:17–40; Num 25:1–3) and Baalzebub, the god of Ekron (2 Kgs 1) were

1. Brueggemann, *Exodus*, 841.

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confronted with the overwhelming power of Yahweh. Israel was different to the surrounding peoples in that it made an exclusive claim for its God Yahweh. Later in Israel's history this led to the universal assertion that "in the beginning" Israel's God "created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1),² which implied the affirmation that other deities don't really exist.³ Monotheism—faith in *one* God which entails a denial of the existence of other gods—came to be a distinguishing mark of Israelite religion.

The only adequate response to Israel's God is total allegiance. Partial commitment would question or deny that Yahweh is really God. Emphasizing Yahweh's exclusiveness and uniqueness was new in the ancient world and Israel was continually reminded of it in its life and worship: "you shall worship no other god, because the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exod 34:14).⁴

Israel's monotheism is not merely a theoretical monotheism, intellectually affirming the existence of Yahweh and denying the existence of other deities. It is mainly a practical monotheism. It asserts that while there may be other gods being worshipped, Israel for its own life and worship recognizes only Yahweh as the one true God. The emphasis is not theological theory whether one or many gods exist, but the praxis of life as to who deserves to claim our allegiance as individuals and as a society.⁵ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall *love* the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4–5, emphasis mine).

2. **The same is affirmed in Isaiah** 44:24 "I am the LORD, who made *all* things, who *alone* stretched out the heavens, who *by myself* spread out the earth" (emphases mine).

3. This is polemically asserted by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah: "You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me" (Isa 43:10). "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (Isa 44:6). "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation" (Jer 10:10).

4. See also our discussion of the second commandment which describes Yahweh as a "jealous God" (Exod 20:5 = Deut 5:9). There are many other texts in the Hebrew Bible that emphasize the exclusiveness and uniqueness of Yahweh, for instance Exod 22:20, 23:13; Deut 4:39, 6:4, 13:5; Josh 23:7; 2 Sam 7:22; 1 Kgs 8:60; 2 Kgs 5:15, 19:19; Hos 13:4; Isa 26:13; Ps 81:9.

5. Schmidt comments that *theoretical* monotheism is the *consequence* rather than the *basis* for Old Testament faith (*Die Zehn Gebote*, 51).

TOWARD A CULTURE OF FREEDOM

MESSAGE

*God Talk—God-Walk*⁶

A mother brings her little boy to the Rabbi for religious instruction. The Rabbi challenges the boy: “I’ll give you a dollar, if you can tell me where God lives!” The boy thinks for a moment. Then he responds: “Rabbi, I’ll give you two dollars if you can tell me where God does not live!”

That is in essence how most discussions about God are carried on. They are discussions *about* God. Does God exist, or doesn’t God exist? Is God here, or is God there? Is God everything, or is God nothing?

The biblical message does not encourage such a procedure. In the Bible there is very little discussion *about* God. It presupposes the being of God and then asks what difference that makes in our lives. Modifying the eleventh thesis of Karl Marx’s on Feuerbach (1845),⁷ we may say Christian faith is not primarily interested in thinking about God, but rather in participating in God’s passion to change history in the direction of what is helpful to make human life human, in the direction of life, freedom, truth and justice.

Unmasking the Gods

Martin Luther, who placed the ten commandments right at the beginning of his *Large Catechism*, names “God” as our ultimate point of reference: “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we find refuge in all need. . . . Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”⁸ Applying Luther’s definition to our situation, we may ask: Where do we anchor our hearts? In what do we put our trust—ultimately? Who or what are our gods?

Is money our God? That would be nothing new. Money and the “heart,” money and religion, have been bed-fellows for a long time. Jesus said: “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt 6:21). And he interprets this: “No one can serve two masters; . . . You cannot serve

6. “*God-Walk*” is the title of Herzog’s book on theology from a liberation perspective.

7. “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* [1845] 72). Moltmann applies the same principle to theology: “The theologian is not concerned merely to supply a different interpretation of the world, of history and of human nature, but to transform them in expectation of a divine transformation.” (*Theology of Hope*, 84).

8. Luther, “The Ten Commandments,” 386.

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God and money” (Matt 6:24). When a young man came to Jesus, one who thought that he had kept all the commandments, Jesus proceeded to give a diagnosis naming where this person had anchored his heart. “Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’” But the young man “went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:17–22). This is the only incident in the gospels where a person rejects the call of Jesus. And it was because of money.

Is consumerism our God? The more we have the more we are! We want to have life. The aspiration to get the most out of life is a legitimate quest. But where is the source and the sustenance of *real* life? Modern shopping centers are built as cathedrals of consumerism. They are designed to appeal to our religious instincts! You drive up to them, and the spire, often made of glass, and a clock tease into your subconscious the intimation of “church” or “temple.” You drive into the parking lot. You get out of the car and walk up to the great entrance with its columns, lights, trees and flowers. The glass doors open automatically and soft music greets you. Reverently you walk around, amazed by the overwhelming riches of the offerings. Finally you settle on the pair of shoes or the suit or the watch and you experience a good feeling. Satisfied, you eat a hamburger, have a coffee and drive home again.

Is activism our God? Consumerism implies activism. Activity and hard work are important. We know that. But it is not of *ultimate* importance. Listen to what the great German mystic of the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), said:

People should not worry as much about what they do but rather about what they are. If they and their ways are good, then their deeds are radiant. If you are righteous, then what you do will also be righteous. We should not think that holiness is based on what we do but rather on what we are, for it is not our works which sanctify us but we who sanctify our works.⁹

Our activism must be grounded in something real. Otherwise it becomes an escape from the real questions in life, and the end-result is what psychologists call “burn out.”

9. Meister Eckhart Quotes. Online: http://historymedren.about.com/od/quotes/a/quote_eckhart_2.htm. This emphasis on “being” as the foundation for “having” or “doing” is at the centre of the Christian vision of reality, but it is also found in other traditions as the wonderful book by Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* shows.

TOWARD A CULTURE OF FREEDOM

Is sexuality our God? Sexuality is part of the gracious gift of a good God. Sexuality is the language of love, and the church has made terrible mistakes in this area when it has denigrated and even demonized sexuality. But outside the circle of love and respect, sexuality can lead to violence and disrespect. The world into which the “ten words” were spoken knew many fertility cults in which sexuality played a dominant role. Religion and sexuality have often been associated in the history of humanity. Today sex tourism is a billion-dollar business. Sexually arousing pictures increase the sales of many newspapers, magazines and internet sites. Child prostitution and sex slavery constitute one of the major human rights problems in our time.¹⁰ Do we expect from sex what only God can give?

Is the yearning for power our God? The historian Lord Acton suggested long ago that the craving for power is the most serious threat to liberty: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹¹ Religion and power have often been wedded. An incident which has shaped the Christian understanding of God more than the decalogue or the Sermon on the Mount was when in the fourth century Constantine became Emperor of the Roman Empire. The decisive battle in his conquest to become emperor in Rome was fought on the Milvian bridge. Just before the battle he had had a vision of Christ, telling him that he should fight this battle under the banner of the cross. He did it—and he won! He made Christianity the state religion, and church and clergy began to enjoy privileges. His messianic ambitions led to his being baptized in the river Jordan, and he used the church to unify his empire. Ever since, the cross has all too often been aligned with political power, rather than with liberating and redemptive service and suffering. Is the church today a voice for those who have no voice, a friend for those who have few friends and a power for the powerless? Are we open to the power of love or have we succumbed to the love of power?

Is the bomb our God? A poster shows an altar in the desert and on the altar a bomb, pointing to heaven. It is declared policy of the governments of all powerful nations that “defense” has priority in all decision-making. Not the aged or the sick or the invalids in our midst. Not health and education. Not the children of the world, 30,000 of whom die every day under the

10. See the recent book by Batstone *NOT for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It* (2007), and the “NOT for sale” campaign associated with it.

11. Lord Acton, “Letter to Mandell Creighton” (April 5, 1887), 364.

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age of five. Half of them could be saved tomorrow with a fraction of our military budgets. Not the social security schemes. Not the unemployment problem. Not development aid. No, military defense and the associated industrial-military complex and “intelligence” industry! We accept the fact that 12 million children die each year for want of food, water and medical treatment, while we spend billions on arms. We accept the fact that our best brains and engineers are working for the military complex, even though we desperately need their brain power for planning a human future of justice for all people. There is no question of course that we need structures like government, police, military, and a legal system to organize human life together. But has not a militaristic mindset taken on religious dimensions? Do we need the arms race to defend ourselves against aggressors, or do we need it to sustain our markets, fuel our industries and protect our possessions? Do we trust God also in our public life or have we reduced him to be redeemer of our souls, while in the public arena we trust other gods?

Has our longing for security replaced God in our lives? The psychology is simple. The existential anxiety that is part of our human finitude becomes intensified with events like the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, the two bomb attacks in the tourist areas of Bali (2003 and 2005), as well as the horrifying attacks in Madrid (2004), London (2005), New Delhi (2005) and Amman (2005). Thousands of innocent people were killed and many more injured. The message is loud and clear: it could happen anywhere, at any time, to any one. Anxiety spreads quickly. How did politicians and governments respond? With security measures. The Australian government, for instance, within a short time issued 37 new laws, questioned the absolute authority of human rights and even withdrew from strengthening the world-wide struggle for the abolition of torture.¹² Some of these measures may be important, perhaps even necessary. But it is an illusion to think that security measures can deal with fear. It is like a child going into a dark cellar pressing its favorite doll close to the chest. It gives the feeling of security. But it is an illusion. We have to learn to have confidence in life and then simply go on living. It is an illusion to run after other gods to fill the deepest longings of our life.

Is religion our god? Even in the church we urgently need to hear the warning not to follow other gods. We confess that “*Jesus is Lord*,” but then we want to defend the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of our religious

12. For details see Lorenzen, “Freedom or security,” 339–51; “Freedom from fear,” 193–99.

experience, and the sinlessness of the church. The Bible, our experience, and the church can be icons that reflect or allow access to the divine. They become idols, other gods, if we assign to them the status of divinity. “Where the church is soft on idols, it becomes muted on social criticism.”¹³

Ultimate and Penultimate Concerns

To get a better handle on the difference between God and the gods we can take a brief look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer distinguishes between an ultimate concern and penultimate concerns.¹⁴ They are different, but they are not disconnected. They are related. A person’s relationship to God—the “justification of the sinner by grace alone”—is ultimate. It is the “origin and essence of all Christian life.” But this ultimate reality seeks echoes in our daily lives. With reference to the Matthean parable of the last judgment (Matt 25:31–46), Bonhoeffer describes life in the penultimate as “being human” and “being good.” Concretely that means giving bread to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, justice to the deprived, freedom to the oppressed, community to the lonely and discipline to the lazy. Failing to do that “would be blasphemy against God and our neighbor.” Indeed, how can those who are hungry, deprived and oppressed hear about ultimate things of grace, faith and justification of the sinner? “The entry of grace is the ultimate,” nevertheless “to bring bread to the hungry is preparing the way for the coming of grace.” Even worthy causes like love for our family, our responsible citizenship (patriotism), our possessions can distort our lives if they become our ultimate concerns, if we hang our hearts on them, if they become our gods.

Here we find also the deeper reason why the Judeo-Christian heritage insists on monotheism (that there is one God) and maintains that God’s ways have a universal claim. The intention is not imperialism or conquest. The intention is to underline that the God who is over against us makes a liberating claim on our whole life and on all of our life. As human beings we are woven into a global network of relationships. Only a God who is “global” and who is “one” can meet our deepest needs. A religion with many gods tends to project human needs and then create gods to meet them. There is a god for peace and for war, for life and for death, for food and for sex. Monotheism is the recognition and assertion that there is one God

13. Brueggemann, *Exodus*, 844.

14. Bonhoeffer, “Ultimate and Penultimate Things,” 146–70.

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who calls us to faith and invites our obedience. The so-called projection theory claims that we deal with our needs and deficiencies by creating our own gods. We feel weak and are aware of our failures—therefore we create a strong and sinless deity. The “cargo cult” in New Guinea and Melanisia came into being when the native people observed that large aeroplanes were bringing goods to white people. So, by adopting “white man’s” way of worship they thought that the heavenly messengers would bring such good also to them. The first commandment therefore has an anti-religious dimension. Not religion as such is its goal, but to point people to the one place, the one reality, where true fulfillment can be found.

God’s Liberating Claim on Our Life

Against the popular projection theory of Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud, we insist that God is not a human creation. God is not the projection of our needs and interests. God is the source of our life and the ground of our freedom. There is discernible content to God and that content is not simply a validation of human interests. Faith in God therefore has a critical edge.

In 1934, shortly after Adolf Hitler had claimed near-total allegiance of the German people, some Christian theologians met in a little town near Cologne and issued the so-called *Barmen Theological Declaration*. Its first paragraph reads:

I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved. (John 10:1, 9)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the *one* Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God’s revelation.

This does not mean that God’s presence cannot be found in our lives, in history and in nature. But it does mean that for Christians, God is not arbitrary. God has defined and interpreted God’s nature in the story of Jesus

and it is that story which alone is the source of the church's proclamation and the measure for what is divine and what is not.

This implies an exclusiveness which opponents to faith consider as being intolerant and even arrogant. Here we need to tread carefully. The ancient world was full of gods. The Greek and Roman worldview included many deities, both male and female. They corresponded to human life and human ambitions. There was a god for life, a god for war, a god for love and a god for sex, a god for agriculture and a god for trade. As we said before, these deities were relevant for *partial* aspects of human life. It was therefore a significant advance in human development when *one* deity replaced the *many* deities. If we believe that relationship to the divine is an important dimension to human life, then only if the deity is *one* and *universal* can it provide an "over against" to human life and thus speak something *new* and *different* into our lives.

"You Shall Have No Other Gods"

At this point things become personal. We do not properly respond to God if we talk *about* God. God is portrayed as setting people free, as claiming their allegiance, as wanting to shape their life. God's claim entails the elements of unconditional love (*agape*) and at the same time the invitation (*eros*) to live a responsible and meaningful life. Those who have experienced God as a liberating and personal reality "won't need any other gods," and therefore, "you shall have no other gods but me." The conflict with the despisers of religion is not whether God is or whether God is one or many, but whether we need God at all for a fulfilled and successful human life.

Freedom entails responsibility and discipline. We recall Joshua's great sermon to the people of God (Josh 24). He first reminds them of God's great liberation from slavery in Egypt, but with it comes the personal challenge:

put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River land in Egypt, and serve the LORD. . . . Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. (Josh 24:14-15)