

God-Making: When Talking About God *is* the Problem

by

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Can talking about God ever be a problem? Yes, God-Talk is a problem when the “god” of our own making is formed as a product of theological discussion and knowingly defended by zealous believers. In this paper, I will describe the environment of “God-Making.” I will provide a real world example and conclude with practical steps to avoid God-Making.

The Environment: Knowing When Talking About God May Be a Problem

The undiscerning lay person, pastor or seminarian is trained to talk about “God,” but not identify who they believe God to be, nor request others to define who they think God to be. They are comfortable engaging in “God talk” with people of other religions. Talking about God (without the cumbrance of essential doctrine) is a virtue. Generalities replace specifics. Inclusiveness is praised and exclusiveness is scorned. Theological laziness suppresses discernment. Orthodoxy is confined, while God-Talk is left undefined. Essentials are redefined. Truth is inconvenient. Boundaries are agreed upon. The undiscerning lay person, pastor or seminarian will quickly defend themselves, their shared “God talk,” and the “God” they presume to be speaking so truthfully about. Jesus is unnecessary.ⁱ

What happens when Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists pray together and talk about “God” in a classroom without defining who God is?ⁱⁱ What happens when a Christian and a Mormon ignore the doctrinal differences between Orthodox Christianity and Mormonism? What about pastors who preach to the same congregation, week in and week out, but never define who God is according to orthodox Christian doctrine and simply assume that everyone agrees upon the same doctrinal standards? Is it possible that all of our talk about God in certain situations can actually become false God-Talk about a god that does not exist? And, as God-Talk remains unchallenged, our God-Talk becomes God-Making. Consider the example in the following section of the Unitarian Universalist who insisted that we (the other chaplains who were Christians) allow her to talk about “God” unchallenged.

The God-Talking Unitarian Universalist Chaplain

God-Talk, as I have described above, can only exist in a vacuum of noncompeting religious views. When this environment is created, people may talk about “God” openly—ignoring distinctive doctrinal beliefs. For example, ministering as a hospital contract chaplain, I was once reprimanded and warned when I objected to a Unitarian Universalist praying with a Roman Catholic family without identifying herself as a Unitarian.ⁱⁱⁱ She knew that she believed very differently than the Roman Catholic family on essential doctrinal differences. She could have called the number for the local priest. She could have asked for a Roman Catholic or even a Protestant nurse to come and pray with the family. Instead, she assumed her theology and her own doctrinal standards on the family. When, at a department meeting, I presented to her an

alternative approach of identifying herself as who she really was to the family and asking the family for permission to pray with and for them, she became very defensive, very angry and the head of our department cut me off quickly. The department Head desired an undefined theological environment. We were expected to talk about God as if all of us were ultimately talking about the same God. It was a pluralist department. This works well for a Unitarian Universalist, who would accept anyone's view of God as legitimate (monotheists, polytheists, humanists, pantheists, nature worshippers).^{iv} Yet, as an orthodox affirming Christian, I cannot accept that a nature worshipper and a Christian are worshipping the same God. The same goes for this Unitarian Universalist. I challenged the vacuum of noncompeting religious views and it was a direct threat to the created environment of God-Talk and the process of God-Making.^v

I call it a "vacuum" because it is a forced, created and unnatural environment in the context of interreligious dialogue in the rapidly expanding multi-religious world community and the theological arena of ideas. Common sense tells us that different religions have different understandings about who God is according to their sacred texts and traditions. Jews reject Jesus' divinity and resurrection. Muslims (as well as all other religions) reject the orthodox understanding of the Trinity. Christian orthodoxy rejects the doctrine of reincarnation. Mormons are polytheists. Christian Scientists view the physical world as ultimately an illusion. The norm in a multi-religious landscape, with interreligious dialogue, and consequently, Christian theological debate is, and must be, one of competing truth claims about who God is. Acknowledging the inherent competitive nature of our truth claims is the only way to fully appreciate the "truth claim" of another. But, when we ignore the inherent competitive nature of our "truth claims,"

we are sucked into the vacuum of noncompeting religious views, we engage in God-Talk and consequently, we God-Make.

But, who is this “God” that we make? When a multi-religious environment is present, and the term “God” is used by all participants, but left undefined, the shared conversation makes a substitute name. “God” exists in multi-religious harmony despite specific, differing religious doctrinal claims. “God” becomes a canopy-like being, assumed to be known truthfully by all from their various backgrounds. God-Making does not even require a religious crowd. Gather up 12 atheists and allow them to talk about “God.” Ironically, they will create, define and defend a “God” they must reject that should not have existed to them in the first place. As long as the nature of “God” is not challenged, all traditions may continue to wax theological until the cows come home. The increase of God-Talk only allows for greater significance of “God.” Creeds may be formed. Purposes and plans originate and are planned out in earnest service to a figment of a shared imagination. Yet, a single, exclusive, doctrinal comment from any religious tradition may rupture the vacuous theological discussion, immediately deflating the man-made “Deity.”

How to Avoid God-Making

Listen: Listen to how people employ the term “God.” Do they define who God is? When I attend a worship service at another church (Christian, of course) I assume the speaker is orthodox, but I always listen very carefully. Recently, at a worship service, in an ultra conservative and orthodox seminary environment, the person who gave the Invocation (prayer) at the beginning of the service referred to Jesus in the following way: “You were created king.” Now, we know that Jesus is not a “created” anyone (John 1.1, 14). It was an egregious misstatement. Yet, I will still assume the stated doctrinal position of the seminary worship service I was attending. I will ask for clarification from others later. I do not think that we have to

be constantly on a “witch hunt” footing. But, as Christians, we should always have our theological antennae up and alert.

Specify: How do people refer to Jesus? Is Jesus the unique or one and only Son who is sent from the Father (John 3:16), or is Jesus misrepresented as one of many options? God-Talk will avoid the exclusive nature of Jesus (John 5:18; 14:6). The “Deity” of “God-Talk” will appear to be the most inclusive, accepting and appealing “God” ever imagined by humans—because, it is.

Challenge: Do not be afraid to challenge the vacuum of noncompeting religious views. It will not make you popular, so trade that fading human praise for faithfulness that leads to an eternal prize (1 Cor. 9:25). By sharing the uniqueness of Jesus among other options, you share the truth about who He is and the implications for rejecting Him (John 8:24). God-Making cannot be left to replace serious, theological discussion.

I foresee the process of God-Making as a serious threat to theological education and reflection in the future. As we become more of a multi-religious society in North America, pluralism will be an increasingly attractive option. Postmodernism has taught many that Truth is not absolute, but created by community. Ultimately, the end result of Postmodernism will be a “God” made and defended through “God-Talk.” A discerning pastor, seminarian or lay person might be tempted to coexist in the vacuum of noncompeting religious ideas. There are many reasons for this. Most people will avoid conflict when they can. Yet, the discerning Christian must remember that in the view of eternity, there are no coexisting truth claims regarding the nature of the Trinity (Rev. 21-22). There is only one Reality who exists eternally. So, take a jab. Challenge a statement. Be ready to give a reason in loving gentleness for the hope of Christ that you have set apart in your heart (1 Peter 3:15). The interest in religion and spirituality will not cease (but I predict will increase), and therefore people will want to be able to talk about God in an inclusive, non-judgmental manner. It will be a great time, like none other, to be a well-equipped, orthodox, evangelical, apologetic Christian.^{vi}

ⁱ In contrast, this type of God-Talk does not exist with discerning lay persons, pastors and seminarians. They know what the core theological beliefs are of other faiths. They understand that those beliefs are competing religious views. They are able to listen to others talk about God, without agreeing with them, giving up their own core theological beliefs, or blurring doctrinal lines at anytime. They will articulate (scripturally and doctrinally) Christian orthodoxy. Because they know what they believe, and what they cannot deny in order to believe what they believe, and, what other competing religious views are and what those persons of that faith cannot deny, they then, engage these views in the arena of ideas.

ⁱⁱ This is exactly what is happening at the Claremont School of Theology through the University Project. See <http://www.cst.edu/UniversityProject/index.php>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Why should we assume that someone of a different religion wants us to pray for them? I have met Protestant Christians who think Roman Catholics are heretics. They become uncomfortable. Why should we assume that a Roman Catholic would want someone to pray for them, if they knew that that person rejected the Trinity?

^{iv} Andreas W. Reif, *Unitarian-Universalist Association Pamphlet* (Exeter: SDM, Inc, 1989),

^v In contrast, I was often called to “pray” with people I had never met before. Perhaps, a woman’s husband of 50 years had just died. Or, perhaps, family was gathering in the Emergency Room waiting area while a son fought for his life after a tragic car wreck. As a chaplain, I was always very sensitive to the situation. I never forced my views on anyone else. When I prayed, I prayed to Jesus. Almost always, I identified myself as a Christian, so the family would never be put in an awkward situation. For example, on at least one instance, a Roman Catholic family preferred that I simply notify the nearest priest at the local parish. In over a hundred death cases, and hundreds of other situations, never once did someone openly object to me identifying myself as a Christian and praying specifically in Jesus’ name or, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It only happened when I challenged someone’s God-Talk.

^{vi} “Apologetic” means to “a defender of the faith.”