

The SHIFTING God(s) of Western Christianity

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Western Christians, especially missionaries from the West, have always declared that they worship and proclaim only one God, the God of the Bible, the God of the whole world. However, in spite of this theological ideal, in actuality Western Christians – including evangelical Christians – commonly indulge in spiritual promiscuity with gods other than the God of the universe. Much like ancient Israel in Canaan, we, too, radically diminish God's place in our worldview and in our lives, substituting various gods from our cultural environment.

Of course, the nearly universal modern awareness of the whole physical world, and even of outer space, has helped Western Christians shake much of the territorial linkage of God which we saw in many world religions and also in early Israel Western Christians do believe in a geographically universal God who should be made known to people everywhere. But that is not the whole story.

The Diminution of God

Western culture, with its emphases on science and technology, has for decades been in the process of eliminating God's involvement in ever larger areas of human concern like weather, agriculture, economic well-being, medicine, mental illness, and almost everything else Bonhoeffer spoke of the God of Western religion as a *Deus ex machina*, an artificial element introduced into human thinking to provide quick, superficial solutions. People use this God to provide the answers and explanations beyond the point at which their understanding fails. But such a God is constantly being pushed farther and farther back as our secular knowledge advances

A Specialized God of Religion

This diminished God of Western Christianity has become a specialized God, restricted largely to preparing people for the afterlife. This drift seriously troubles most informed third world Christians. In their religious backgrounds, God/gods dealt with all of life, but in the Christianity of the Western missionaries they have been taught to worship a God with a narrow specialization

A Tribal God

In some respects, we give our diminished God many of the characteristics which prophets of ancient Israel and New Testament writers sought for centuries to help the Israelites outgrow. Israel struggled to shake its understanding of Yahweh as a tribal God and to learn to see God as the God of all peoples.... And when Jesus read the Scripture in a Nazareth synagogue, people spoke well of him until he implied that the Messiah was for Gentiles as well as Jews. Then the same people were enraged (Lk 4:22-30).

That struggle to grow out of a tribal God continued in the early Christian church, and Paul's conviction about this matter was sounded with great clarity: "There is no difference

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between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 GNB). But although we proclaim that God is the God of all peoples worldwide, we shrink God down into our own parochial deity

The diminished God of modern Western Christianity leaves much room for other gods to take over.

Religiously, God is made in the image of our particular biblical interpretation. We see our own understanding of God as biblical, that of other Christians as not. We consider the reflection of God we see dimly in the mirror to be the only true reflection. Those images which others see in the same glass are gods to be destroyed.

I have met Bible translators who considered themselves and their work so close to God and so sacred, that they hesitated to let me look at it, even though they wanted the Bible Society to publish it. In one case, I sat on the doorstep of a mission house for three mornings while the missionaries inside debated about whether I was Christian enough to look at their work. In another I was told outright that they could not put the fruit of their spiritual labors before an “unsanctified” outsider....

Rivals to the Universal God

... The diminished, specialized, tribal God of modern Western Christianity thus leaves a great deal of room in our lives for other gods to take over. Western Christians therefore happily worship gods which are rivals to the God of the universe. We are idolaters. Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance (Tillich 1953 1:16).



Wealth as God

The Western secular, materialistic and scientific worldview finds the God of the Bible to be largely irrelevant, most blatantly so in the area of economics. When we read the specifics of Old Testament economic law, such as giving back the land to its original owners every fiftieth year (Lev 25:10-13,25-28), charging no interest on money loaned (Lev 25:35-38; Deut 23:19-20; Neh 5:7-10),

giving whatever to whoever asks for it (Mt 5:42), and never asking back some item that has been borrowed (Lk 6:30-35), we get the uncomfortable feeling that the God of the Bible knows very little about a viable economic system

Third world Christians who have lived in America or who know missionaries well perceive that wealth rather than God is the organizing principle in secularized Western culture, including Western Christianity. The massive economic hole we sense in the universal God leaves a lot of room for an economic idol for wealth as God



Materialism as God

[Author John White notes,] “My definition of Western materialism might appear to exclude Christians. No Christian would agree (that is, if the matter were put to him or her as an abstract proposition) that matter is all that matters, for our very faith negates the assertion. Yet if our behavior (as distinct from our verbal profession) is examined, many of us who call ourselves Christians begin to look more like materialists. We talk of heaven, but we strive for things.”

[White continues,] “Yet Christians are rarely happy as materialists. Heaven tugs at us too vigorously. We find ourselves apologizing for our new cars or our larger houses. This tug of war renders most Christians ill at ease and at times ineffective” (White 1979:38-39).



Technology as God

Technology, the art of tool-making, is one of the wonderful capacities with which God has endowed human creatures. However, both nations and people can grant technology a life of its own, set it on its own

course, and make it their God. People convince themselves that what technology can do, it must do, and do it for them.

The Church as God

For some people, some groups, some denominations, the specialized God of religion has begotten a son, a junior God, the church – my church, my denomination, my community of believers. When the church is God, the community of those who hold common beliefs and practices and who submit to a common rule becomes the ultimate object of

trust and loyalty. The church becomes the source of truth. What the church teaches is believed and is believed because it is what the church teaches. The church is trusted to be the judge of what is right and wrong and the guarantor of salvation.

When the church is God, to have faith in God is to have faith in the church. To turn to God is to be converted to the church because the two are identical. The way to God is through the church. The community that once pointed to the faithfulness of God now points to itself as the faithful representative of God. God and the church have become so identified that often the word "God" means the collective representation of the church. God is defined as the one in whom the church believes.

Church history is reinterpreted from the account of the mighty deeds of God in creation, judgment, and redemption, to the story of the church. Church history becomes holy history, an account of the deeds whereby the special community was formed and its rites established. Church rituals, instead of being the dramatic reenactments of what God has done, is doing, and will do for people, become celebrations of the deeds of the church or its functionaries.

The unity of the church, the holiness of the church, and the universality of the church are valued not so much because they reflect the unity, holiness, and universality of one God, but as ends to be sought for the sake of the church. They are virtues to be celebrated because in them the true church makes its appearance. The God to whom reference is made in every act of worship and in every proclamation of the church's message is still acknowledged, but is merged into the church as God (Niebuhr 1943:58-59; Niebuhr 1951:68).

Evangelical Protestants do not hesitate to point to the Roman Catholic church as being the God of Catholics. But especially in evangelical churches which began as small separate movements and continued to be ingrown because of their differences from the world around them, the church has likewise often become God. The small body of fellow believers bonds into a group which gets its life, its sustenance, its identity, from the church. Similarly, larger, more historical churches whose God has been diminished, seek to fill the gap by making the church into a God and thus fall into self-worship.

Mutual Reinforcement of the Gods

We have other gods as well, but those already mentioned illustrate the phenomenon of the shifting gods in the West. As the God of the universe, to whom we still give lip service, has been special-

ized to religion and particularized to a welter of conflicting interests of nation, denomination, and the individual, three other mutually reinforcing, powerful gods fill the gap left by this diminution.

The God of materialism supplies the motivation. Consumed with the worship of things, goods, belongings, we have turned to technology to provide them for us, and as technology has performed many miracles for us in this century, we worship it also as our God. The God of technology, in turn, rewards some of us with wealth, which makes us comfortable and gives us security, so we worship it, too. The God of wealth, in turn, feeds the God of materialism, making it possible for us to acquire the goods we crave (Goudzwaard 1984:13; Walsh and Middleton 1953:131-39).

So we have a trinity of mutual reinforcement among these three great gods of the gap, three great idols to which we have built our altars, and in whose slavery we live. And that trinity has been co-opted into the service both of our specialized God of religion and of our tribal God. The materialism-technology-wealth trinity of idols nourishes the God of religion and the tribal God, making them more powerful, and us more comfortable in them. The God of the church, spawned by the God of religion, is especially dependent on this trinity of idols and governed by it. And all look to the tribal God for security against other tribal gods and the people who worship them....

We see our idols more clearly when we examine ourselves in light of other cultures, including biblical cultures. They, too, have their idols, of course, but if we see only their idols and not our own, we do not see much of the truth. Peoples of other cultures sometimes need to see their idols through our eyes, and sometimes we need to see ours through theirs. 🌐

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