

Using God: Using God for Mortal Purposes is Alive and Well

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I

God is a very busy guy! He is being used for so many purposes these days. Of course, that is not new. But considering what we now have learned about our world, one would think we could give God a break. Instead, it seems that we are using God more than ever. Poor God.

II

I need to clarify my terms -- speaking of God as a guy. That's the way God has been handed down to us. Our father in heaven. Michelangelo's bearded guy sitting on a cloud taking care of his creation. The Lord God Jehovah of the Bible and the Torah. The Allah of the Koran. So, for the moment, I am using the conventional western *conception* of grandfatherly God, ubiquitously visualized as the divine source and the powerful master operator of everything. We all do have our own, individual, conceptions of God.

III

How *is* God *used*? For whatever people choose to use God for. Many of the ways God is used are appalling. God is used to promote political candidates and to oppose other political candidates. God is used to justify our cultural and social biases. God is used to promote and wage war. God is used to justify imposing one nation's rule over other peoples. God is used to justify American world dominance -- some of our politicians keep referring to this by the code words "American exceptionalism," inferring that the U.S. is specially chosen by God to lead the world and to impose its will on other peoples. Closer to home, God is used to explain the good things as well as to justify the bad things that happen to us. God is used to find the correct mates for humans. Many popular ministers claim that if you serve God you will acquire wealth. (Many such ministers demonstrate that using God in that manner produces great wealth for them -- multiple homes, private jets, etc.) God also is used to promote products and improve profits. God is used to stimulate the economy at annual holiday celebrations.

Now I am not opposed to the God-related euphemisms that spice our speech, like "Oh my God." So many people refer to an unusual occurrence by exclaiming "Oh my *God*" that "OMG" has become a common abbreviation in writing. Yahoo has created an Internet site titled "OMG." Nor am I talking about our expressions of concern for others, like "God bless you," or "may God help you." I am not against the belief in God, the God of one's own choosing. I am concerned about the intentional use of God for our own selfish purposes, for profit, for political gain, and to justify our prejudices.

IV

Using God for political purposes? Let me provide some real-life, current examples of this form of using God. Here in America, this fall, Wisconsin Bishop David Ricken, stated that voting for the Democratic Party was equivalent to voting for "intrinsic evil" and that *God* may condemn your soul to hell if you do not vote Republican. In Pennsylvania, Illinois, Alaska, Colorado, New Jersey, and New York, the bishops issued similar exhortations. Clearly they had decided

whom *God* wanted to win the election. A recent U.S. president even said that *God* had told *him* that *God* wanted him to be president.

In Illinois, Bishop Daniel Jenky issued a letter stating that voting for politicians who do not oppose abortion "thereby reject Jesus as their Lord." Some religious leaders were even more assertive about what God wants. Ridgway Christian Ministries in Colorado mailed a magazine to its subscribers headlining: "Honor God! Love your country! Vote Republican."

When I was in high school, during the McCarthy era and the paranoia about "Godless Communism," the pledge of allegiance to the flag was changed by congress to insert God -- as in "one nation, under God, ..." Far from being a secular, God-shunning republic as some would have us believe, we have God on our dollars, God in our Congress, virtually every politician ends a speech with "God bless America," and God help him if he doesn't. Just to shore things up for God, last year one of our Congressmen from Virginia, Representative Randy Forbes, introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives to affirm that the national motto of the United States is "In God We Trust." It passed the House 396 to 9. So much for *e pluribus unum*, the original motto on the United States Seal.

Using God to justify social and cultural biases? God is used to support every effort to deny the equal rights of citizenship to same-sex couples, and to LGBT people generally. God's wishes are cited in efforts to deny abortions to raped women. God's will is cited in choosing to let a woman die when she would be saved by an abortion.

We are all aware of poor God's dilemma in wartime. Two soldiers from different countries face each other in combat. The mother of each is asking God to spare *her* son, implying God should cause her son to prevail over the other mother's son. In conflict different versions of God are often being implored. At such times people like recently retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General William Boykin call claim support from the deity they call the "true God" in defeating people who serve a "false God."

Hank sang for us Bob Dylan's song "With God on Our Side." Dylan played on the irony of this conception of God:

...

*But now we got weapons
Of the chemical dust
If fire them we're forced to
Then fire them we must
One push of the button
And a shot the world wide
And you never ask questions
When God's on your side.*

Using God to explain the bad things that happen? Former Arkansas Governor and presidential candidate Mike Huckabee responded to the massacre of children at Newtown, Connecticut, claiming *God* let this horrific event happen because American schools do not incorporate Christian religion. He asked, "Should we be so surprised that schools would become a place of carnage?" Bryan Fischer, on his American Family Radio, brought God into the situation this way: "You know," he said, "the question's gonna come up, where was God? I thought God cared about the little children, God protected the little children. Where was God when all this went down? And here's the bottom line: God is not gonna go where he's not wanted. ... we have spent 50 years telling God to get lost. Telling God, we do not want you in our schools, ..." Mr. Huckabee and Mr. Fischer believe, apparently, that if you hurt God's feelings he will allow the slaughter of little children. What a pitiful conception of God.

Responding to this notion that we have hurt God's feelings, Illinois State Senator Dennis Krause introduced legislation to allow that schools require the daily recitation of the Lord's Prayer in classrooms, bringing the Christian religion into schools so that God will be pleased again. Think about it. Dealing with the problem of allowing military style assault weapons to be available to crazed people by requiring school kids to recite the Lord's Prayer. This is "using God" in a way that demeans the whole conception of God.

On the lighter side -- using God to find the correct mate? I see commercials on TV and the Internet that if you subscribe (for a fee of course) to the Christian Singles company, you will "find God's match for you." I wonder if God ever thinks about getting a royalty for people using his name to make a buck.

I could continue with many more examples, but I think you get the idea. So what is the point of my concern about people using God? Aren't people free to believe what they choose to believe and, in the U.S. anyway, to say what they want to say? Here are some of the concerns I would like to share with you that I think have an impact on our spiritual lives.

V

Many people, perhaps most people in this world, have a sense of awe and wonder at this marvelous world. It is as if we have awakened, opened our eyes, and said, "Wow. I exist. All of this exists. Why? Must be some meaning to it? I want to tune in to it. I want to give this miraculous existence a name. I want to be mindful of it; to pay attention to it. I can call it 'God.' Or, whatever."

People who use God for selfish purposes distort this open and respectful conception of the "something" we might feel that is behind all this wonder. Using God for our own selfish purposes, conveys the message that *God* is *man's* servant. As some have observed, it is "creating God in man's image."

Using God to explain bad things -- or good things that happen is an immature way of thinking that avoids taking responsibility for our actions, or for recognizing the realities of our world. It

is God's fault that we are frail, or sick, or depressed. It is God's blessing to us particularly that our airplane did not crash but another one did. It is God's fault if a tsunami arises and wipes out the towns. It is God's fault that a crazy, angry man shoots down school children.

A related danger in using God in this way is that some people unfairly blame themselves for the good and the bad. They take on unwarranted guilt for what happens or doesn't happen. Like a child who does not get what she wants from Santa, she blames herself -- "What did I do to displease Santa?" The answer, likely, is that she is not to blame.

Using God to explain things excludes rational thinking. It avoids devising rational solutions to the problems of living. Replacing worn out tires is a more rational solution than praying to God that the old tires won't blow out on the freeway, or blaming God if they do. Training for a different job is a more rational solution than praying to God for a job we would like but for which there is no demand.

In Mongolia we stopped along a stretch of road near some stupas. Our guide told us that there had been many bad accidents along that stretch of road. Instead of investing in road improvements they built the stupas. We laugh at that, then do the same things in different ways.

I recently finished an inspiring book, *Drift*, about the strength of human spirit in the face of overwhelmingly bad odds. The author, Steve Callahan, was a solo sailor in the Atlantic Ocean whose little sailboat suddenly was struck and sunk in the middle of the night. Steve was left on the water with a tiny inflatable life raft -- essentially two inner tubes -- and a very few emergency supplies. To condense the book into a sentence, Steve suffered but survived one disastrous blow after another by his own ingenuity. His book is a day-by-day, often stream of consciousness account of the 76 days he drifted across the Atlantic before arriving at a Caribbean island. Steve writes of his thoughts about whether to end his suffering and just to let the sea take him. He muses on whether to keep on devising solutions that seem to be destroyed by the powers of the sea as fast as he can conceive of them. He describes the new relationship he develops with the sea and the animals of the sea, with nature and of his place in nature. He never blames God. He never asks for God's help. Steve just says, in essence -- here I am, these things have happened, here is how I choose to deal with all of this. His resilience of spirit was the key to his survival.

VI

Is there good that can come from visualizing a God behind this amazing phenomenon we call life? Many people, now and throughout history, have the feeling that there is more to life than materialism, that there is meaning to our existence, that there might be a creative power beyond our understanding. Rather than using God as an object for assigning blame, God might be felt as the power of love. Visualizing God in one's own way can enrich our experience of life on this earth.