

America's God: YHWH, Baal, or Golden Calf?

Frederick Niedner

Crossings Conference, St. Louis, MO, 21 October 2008

Who Do You Say "I Am": Getting Honest about God Today

Crossings Second International Conference

St. Louis, MO, October 19-22, 2008

I'm grateful to be with this group of Crossings friends and colleagues once again. Exemplars like Walter Bouman taught some of us the importance of opening conference talks with humor, so I usually begin that way. I wasn't sure I needed any this time, thinking that perhaps my title alone was sufficiently curious. Moreover, connecting religion and the nation or politics gives us either too much or too little to laugh about today. In a political season, we learn the real problem with political jokes. Too many of them get elected.

It also occurred to me that the whole question my presentation addresses is moot. When Garrison Keillor visited Muncie, IN, a few years ago in order to broadcast his *Prairie Home Companion* show from there, he asserted that all of Indiana struck him as Lutheran. I think he really meant to describe the entire Midwest. Everyone is Lutheran, he said. Even the atheists. It's the Lutheran God they don't believe in.

In any case, a preliminary word on the history of my title. Cathy Lessmann, for the planning committee, suggested, "Is America's God More Yahweh or More Baal?" That gave me a bit of pause. I wondered if folks would think that I'd found it

necessary to take up some kind of dialogue with an old 'classic' in the history of churchly affairs that led, oddly enough, to moments and meetings such as this. Back in 1965, Herman J. Otten, the Bishop of New Haven, published a book titled *Baal or God*. [Question: If there had been no Herman Otten, what would Lutheranism look like today? Would there be conferences such as this one on Law, Gospel, and *theologia crucis* these days? And if so, on what campus(es) would they be held? On Catholic ones such as this? Or at Lutheran venues, like the seminary campus just across the river?]

The introduction to Otten's volume quotes a 1924 issue of the *Christian Century* (without attribution of author) as saying, "Christianity according to fundamentalism is one religion and Christianity according to modernism is another. . .there is a clash here as profound and grim as between Christianity and Confucianism. The God of the fundamentalist is one God, the God of the modernist another." For Otten, fundamentalism represents "historic Christianity," while modernist Christianity (elsewhere termed "liberalism" in the introduction as well as the rest of the volume) is to fundamentalism what Baal worship was to the worship of the true God.

I would assert that neither fundamentalism nor modernism is authentic, catholic, apostolic Christianity. My assignment, however, is not to dialogue with Herman Otten, at least not directly, but to get honest about God, and to ask of America, "Who do you say I am?" And to do that, I felt it necessary to add a third possibility besides YHWH or Baal. Hence, "Golden Calf" is part of the title. The reason will hopefully become clear later on.

I'm usually wrong about things, and I don't expect this occasion to be an exception. Thus, I aim to generate discussion with a few debatable hypotheses about American popular religion, and I

lay no claim to having the last word. The most likely value in the conversation has to do with how we diagnose our own and our congregations' condition as we preach and teach law and gospel.

We could begin with a quick overview of "civil religion," which has been part of the discussion of western culture(s) ever since Rousseau's *Social Contract* and its assertion that while keeping church and state separate is necessary, a truly healthy and functional society nevertheless requires a contract among citizens that in effect asks for a kind of religious commitment and a level of devotion.

Robert Bellah has described the American version of the Social Contract as follows:¹

. . . [A]ny coherent and viable society rests on a common set of moral understandings about good and bad, right and wrong, in the realm of individual and social action. It is almost as widely held that these common moral understandings must also in turn rest upon a common set of religious understandings that provide a picture of the universe in terms of which the moral understandings make sense. Such moral and religious understandings produce both a basic cultural legitimization for a society which is viewed as at least approximately in accord with them, and a standard of judgment for the criticism of a society that is seen as deviating too far from them.

Ben Franklin, in his autobiography, gave voice to his version of such moral and religious understanding:²

I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing of good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtues rewarded, either here or hereafter.

These I esteem'd the essentials of every religion.

This plays out, as at least one of Bellah's interpreters suggests, in the following way:³

American civil religion is not what we believe in our heart of hearts about the destiny of our immortal souls. It is, rather, the beliefs we share with our fellow citizens about our national purpose and about the destiny of our national enterprise. Vague and visceral it may be, but there is an American creed, and to be an American is to believe the creed. America is, in this sense, a religious venture.

What is that creed?

Much of America, of course, says we are a Christian nation, not merely a generically religious, more or less Unitarian Universalist collection of believers in the social contract. All manner of folks, from the prominent and the often quoted to ordinary voters, including one of my brothers with whom I have occasional debates, believe that this country was founded on "conservative Christian principles." But that never gets translated out to mean anything that most of us would recognize as authentically Christian, but rather as some form or another of nominally christened but nevertheless generic *opinio legis*. In this common, public view, what makes us Christian is that we're right in conduct and ideology, while others are wrong. God, Jesus, and America are all wrapped up in a kind of secular trinity.

Lamin Sanneh, professor of World Christianity at Yale, lectured at Valparaiso University last week and characterized Americans' peculiar version of Christianity as a type that believes:

- All will eventually come out well – i.e., we have a kind of collective, realized eschatology that's almost uniquely

optimistic among nations of the world where Christians exist in significant numbers.

- Christianity is prosperity oriented. We get something for being Christian. We prosper, specifically as a consequence of being Christian. God looks favorably upon us, and we're better off than others who don't believe as we do. Health and well-being are assumed benefits of repentance and faith.
- We are convinced of our own innocence. Indeed, America in general is convinced of its innocence. Not in the sense of naïve—though in so many ways we're that. But in sense of being well-intentioned, and to some extent also in the sense of being guiltless. Listen to our rhetoric about our wars. We are the *good* guys!! Even when we start a war, we're merely trying to help those others who live without freedom.

There are obvious ways to critique these things.

- Mark's audience would have been very surprised to learn that faith and faithfulness were supposed to get you a happy life. "Take up your cross and follow me!" doesn't exactly sound like the prosperity gospel.
- That anyone anywhere is innocent flies in the face of Lutheran anthropology—and the Bible's. Perhaps Christ only needed to die for the folks in other nations, and for the gays and abortionists in our own country. The rest of us are home free.

As has been well-documented for decades, this attitude tends to view the United States as a "new Israel," a chosen people, ensconced in the Promised Land, a land from which God drove not the Amorites, Hittites, Moabites, Jebusites, etc., but the Arapaho, the Cherokee, the Lakota, and the Hopi peoples, among many others.

Here's a current piece of that kind of thinking that came in a prayer I received recently from the American Bible Society's listserv:

Restoration of our Economy

Lord, our Father, may Your everlasting strength and resolve help solidify and bring together Your Nation of devoted followers to work toward uplifting the economy. We pray for You to forgive foreclosures, for the Nation's dollar to be strong in value once again, and for the government to make wise and Godly decisions with the country's national resources. Let us pray to You, oh Lord, to provide relief to those impoverished and in dire need; and for those of us with wealth and abundance to increase our charity and support as we were taught through Your divine teachings. Amen.

It's not merely old-fashioned conservatives and purveyors of modern-day Manifest Destiny ideology, including the current administration that sees itself as doing God's will in Iraq and elsewhere who think this way, but also folks like Jeremiah Wright, whose notorious "God damn America!" sermon played a temporary role in the current political campaign. Wright's theology makes little sense apart from a notion that America is a special people whom God watches closely so as to reward and punish in accord with our obedience or disobedience to God's laws as articulated in some covenant arrangement we have with God.

The God of Wright's America is a version of YHWH as understood by the prophetic and early Deuteronomic traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures. That God calls a people to eschew all other gods and to demonstrate covenant faithfulness by, in the words of Micah 6:8, "doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God." When we fail at that, we fall under judgment, but not just

any judgment. We come under the more exacting judgment God reserves for the elect. "You only have I known of all the peoples of the earth," says YHWH in Amos 3:2f. "Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities." We must choose between life and death, blessings and curses. When we obey, we're blessed. When we disobey, we're cursed.

It's usually left to modern, often self-proclaimed prophets to match the sins of the people with the punishments as they occur, that is, to examine God's smitings and to discern just what sins they were meant to punish. E.g., Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson famously identified America's toleration of homosexuals as the occasion for some of our punishments, including the awful one we call "9-11."

Since not all in this country are members of Christian or Jewish churches, synagogues, or traditions, this is only part of the population's answer to the question, "Whom do you say that I am, America?" From the majority perspective, however, the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Unitarian Universalists among us may have a different set of religious convictions related to nation and politics, but they hardly count. Those "others" among us are generally viewed like the guests and sojourners of the Hebrew Bible. They pay taxes, etc., but they're not really "us," and we don't let them touch the good china.

When the sojourners begin to act too much like they belong to this chosen people, too, many among us quickly respond like dogs and cats who must mark their territory by urinating on the corners of their turn. This we do by putting the Ten Commandments in the courthouse and Nativity scenes on the lawn in front of city hall, or even better, having a celebrity sing "God Bless America" during the seventh-inning stretch at our ball games. Or in my state, by putting "In God we Trust" on our license plates, next to an image of a rippling, American flag.

But this latter manifestation, the anti-sojourner, turf-marking version of American Christianity, isn't so much a prophetic/Deuteronomic equivalent of ancient Israel's devotions to God, but rather a version of the monarchic covenant arrangement. This we see promulgated in scriptures by Nathan, David, Solomon, and the shapers of the Ark and Succession Narratives. This land and this throne are our divinely given heritage and right, and God's chosen one, the "messiah," acts for and on behalf of God to protect and preserve Israel and to subdue God's (our) enemies. God will punish us with the rod of men if we err, but will not take away the kingdom from us (2 Samuel 7).

When the kingdom was finally lost in 587 BCE, and both the prophetic/Deuteronomic and David/Zion theologies came crashing down in the wake of Josiah's reforms (the most faithful king in YHWH eyes of anyone else, ever, says 2 Kings 23), the prophetic tradition ultimately blamed the kings, although not Josiah, but his grandfather, Manasseh (also 2 Kings 23). I can't help but notice that at this moment in our national history, the prophets among us are still blaming the kings. The financial crisis results from the errors in leadership during the _____ administration, they say. Some fill in that blank with Reagan, some name Clinton, others say Bush II. But it's surely one of them, and not the rest of us!

And so it is, as one pundit put it on the day the Big Bail-Out finally passed, that democratic capitalism celebrated the 160th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto by dropping dead in its tracks.

I don't believe, of course, that YHWH is really the deity we fear, love, and trust in either of these forms of nationalistic American pseudo-Christianity, but I'll say more on that later. Who is the actual or functional deity whom today's prophets hold

over our heads and whom the monarchists venerate as they pee on the corners of our national lawn? I'll return to that question momentarily.

There's another deity to account for, a hard one to name. It's the one who inspires great zeal among those who work tirelessly to stop abortions and to keep gay and lesbian people from having committed relationships that are protected rather than condemned, granted property and inheritance rights rather than being consigned to closets and celibate isolation. I'll not presume to describe everyone in these camps, but in my view these activists are in general a single camp, and their common concern is with other people's sex lives. We mostly obsess on other people's sins when we're trying to ignore or run from the mess of our own, I would argue. And the god we serve in this zealous work is the one who will tell us we're right and give us a privileged position, and who will most surely condemn those others who aren't right, clean, or acceptable. This is the same deity who promises the dominant party in each of the great polarities among humankind—race, class, and gender, otherwise known as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28)—that they rightfully own and can keep their privileged positions.

Though I'll not yet name this deity, he/she/it is a near cousin of the Davidic dynasty's divine patron and comes from the same gene pool as the Deuteronomist's deity as well. But none of these is the God whose gospel we come to know and trust in Jesus Christ.

If there were folks going around today saying Allah or Krishna was America's god, I would have to talk about whether or not such a claim could be true. Some day we may, but so far we don't have to address such claims.

There is another deity to whom America bends the knee, nearly every moment of every day, and in the past few weeks we done so with zealous, fear-filled, passion. I speak of THE MARKET. Have you noticed in the headlines and on the business pages of late how much of our talk is about faith, trust, confidence, and even forgiveness, resurrection, and new life? And none of this is ostensibly religious talk, but discussion of our relationship to THE MARKET, and THE MARKET's recent treatment of such things as our retirement programs, taxes, health systems, and in general our way of life?

We have come to talk like Job, with a twist: "THE MARKET giveth, and THE MARKET taketh away. Blessed be the Name of THE MARKET." More and more, economists and financial experts, who once we called social scientists, sound like theologians who ponder mysteries and mythologies, and not much like scientists who report on empirical data.

Current orthodoxy worships THE MARKET as the mighty giver of all things. If we remain patient, THE MARKET will care for us and see to all our needs. Only a few months ago, economic difficulties left us dangling over an abyss too blasphemous to name—Recession! But no, THE MARKET's prophets told us, those tremors were merely one of THE MARKET's occasional "self-corrections." Think, perhaps, of God having the hiccups, or Zeus swearing off nectar and ambrosia and sticking to bread and water for a spell.

Now, however, THE MARKET has not merely burped, but turned on us and cursed us for our iniquities—greed in high places, prideful over-reaching, and arcane sins such as selling derivatives. Now we must wait until THE MARKET hears our confessions, accepts our repentance, lifts us up, sets our feet upon a rock, and restores our fortunes. Especially our Roth IRA's.

THE MARKET calls prophets who instruct us and ordains priests to mediate between itself and mere mortals. The law of self-correction is among the revelations prophets have brought down from the mountain. Another divine disclosure apparently confirms that while individual or family indebtedness remains a recipe for disaster, an enormous national debt shouldn't worry us. Indeed, we should see it as proof of our leaders' faithful devotion. THE MARKET will absorb the debt, or so the prophets promise.

The chair of the Federal Reserve board serves as THE MARKET's great high priest. Periodically, this individual performs the rites of Interest Rate Adjustment. Most often THE MARKET, along with *cherubim* and *seraphim* on Wall Street, declare all of this very, very good. (Alas, for the moment, even the *cherubim* and *seraphim* have fallen. Only THE MARKET remains.)

A few months ago, faithful priests who serve THE MARKET ordained that most everyone in the country should get \$600 along with a letter asking folks to spend it quickly. This will "stimulate the economy," or, in other words, wake up THE MARKET. Lest you think falling asleep sounds less than godly, be assured that priests have always had the job of rousing gods from languor and inattention. Long ago, sacrificing a few goats usually did the trick, but nothing remains so simple today.

Now, however, we have had to kill not only the goat, but our firstborn children, so to speak. Our sacrifice will be worth \$700 billion, just for starters. I cannot count the zeroes.

Like competing religious traditions, THE MARKET has different kinds of devotees. Rival economic theologies vie for power and ascendancy. Prophets and priests of "supply side economics," who see themselves as reformers and purifiers, have succeeded of late in preaching down the "demand side economics" of the

venerable British prophet, John Maynard Keynes. As in all other struggles, rancor and name-calling break out occasionally. No less a figure than George Bush 1.0 once called Ronald Reagan's supply-side gospel "voodoo economics." Bush lost, of course, and some say he eventually drank the Reaganomics Kool-Aid. Nevertheless, his epithet against the Great Communicator remains in the theological lexicon.

How do the rest of us cope with all this? For better or worse, in this area of life, we can't so easily choose our own theology and shrine. One sect or the other gets to practice its orthodoxy on all of us. Ours is not to reason why, etc.

So long as we remember that THE MARKET cannot ultimately save us from ourselves or from anything else, we can probably trust that THE MARKET isn't smart or wise enough to destroy us, either. These days, however, it's safest to keep such talk at a whisper.

There are some other, really serious corollaries to this MARKET religion. It has pervaded everything in our culture, including the church. (For some of this, I have followed a 1999 Harvey Cox article, "The Market as God," in *The Atlantic Monthly*.) It's not just my university that now has a "marketing plan," but we can all witness the church and its new, market-driven behaviors. Market wisdom is now behind the spread and growth of churches. It dictates music as well as other elements of worship style, and it also gets used to determine the content and tone of proclamation. We have different messages for different clienteles. ("Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, cross-less sermons don't upset us. . . Have it your way!")

But is THE MARKET really God? I think not. It's another lie we tell ourselves. It gives us permission to say that there's nothing we can do, for example, about this or that failure to stand up for our so-called convictions. "Not me, God, but THE

MARKET made me do it. . .”

I think, actually, that THE MARKET is today’s equivalent of Baal, and devotion to THE MARKET like the “fertility religion” of the Canaanites. That religion invited humankind to live within the world conceived by the myth of El and his brood, Baal, Asherah, Nahar, Yam and Mot, the deities who embodied the forces of nature that one needed to know about and dance with if one expected to succeed as a farmer. If you don’t understand the rhythms of the seasons and the activities of Baal and Asherah, just as if you don’t know the laws of supply and demand or the rhythms of THE MARKET, you will fail miserably and perhaps even die.

But THE MARKET isn’t God any more than the seasons of the year or the forces of nature are God. This is idolatry, mistaking the creature for the creator.

As for the deities truly active in American versions of Deuteronomic, prophetic, and monarchic theology, they’re the gods of our own making that prove us right, while others are wrong. They’re finally gods who serve us, not we them. I say this next piece of diagnostic sarcasm everywhere these days, but pardon my pointing out once again that this business of being right about everything is our greatest need, despite what Maslow and others have taught. Even more than security, warmth, food, water—yea verily, even more than sex, we want to be right and to be proven to our detractors as right. If you doubt this, try an experiment. Get married. Sometimes joining a church will work, too. These are marvelous laboratories for testing one’s need to be right about everything. Even little things.

What we really have here, in all cases, I believe, are a collection of golden calves. I can’t go too deeply into Exodus 32, and its obvious link to the actions of Jeroboam, a critic of

Davidic abuse of Israel's theology, who according to 1 Kings 12 substituted golden calves in Bethel and Dan for legitimate worship of YHWH at Jerusalem's temple. What he really did was to set up cherubim at Bethel in the south, and Dan in the north, and to make of his whole nation the throne of YWHH—a holy ark! (Think about it. Would you worship cows if you lost a church fight, and thus got cut off from the sanctuary and the place you were baptized?)

But Exodus 32 puts those golden calves into a story of Israel's attempts to move into a future in the absence of YHWH, or at least of YHWH's servant Moses. The people needed a new symbol of YHWH's presence, so they made *cherubim*. So far so good. I'm not even sure the big party and all the dancing were so bad, though Exodus sure thinks God and Moses were ticked over all this. The real travesty happens later in the story, when Moses confronts Aaron over the whole thing. Aaron had asked for all the people's gold, and he'd melted it and made the *cherub*. But when confronted by Moses, he pleads ignorance. "Gosh, Moses, I just don't know how to explain it. The people started giving me all their gold, I threw it in the fire, and this calf jumped out!!!"

We make idols, then we attribute life to them, and finally we serve them, in part by providing them a life-giving story, conveniently forgetting that we made them. (All the anti-idol poems of the exilic Isaiah apply here.) In one way, I'm suggesting that there is no such thing as THE MARKET, at least not in the sense of a genuinely free market. There is only a manipulated market that's our own creation. We shape and re-shape, adjust and tinker with this deity to get it to meet our needs. We obey as we see fit.

If there were a truly free Market, we would still not have God, at least not YHWH. What we'd have is the sum total of what we can expect and even predict of our selfish, collective nature as

human beings. The market, such as it is, is really nothing more than an image writ large of what we'll do to get what we want, of what will we sacrifice and what will we demand, not for the sake of anyone else, really, but for ourselves.

Hence, in both of American's great religions, that of Rightness and the other of servitude to THE MARKET, we're really engaged in self-worship. Surprise, surprise. But this is no surprise, hopefully, to Lutherans, and in particular to Crossing-practiced Lutherans.

If we worship nature, even if it's merely human nature, we're really devotees of another Baal, if not a golden calf we've made for ourselves. And to the extent that American fundamentalism is essentially a religion whose central tenet is that we're right about Jesus and others are wrong about Jesus, and thus we have our ticket punched while others don't, that is not the worship of God either, but of our own rightness. How smart and pious of us to make the right choice, to assert the right dating of the universe, to stop all sexual activity except the kind that we practice, and to keep women in their place and non-heterosexuals in the closet! Moreover, to the extent that we trust in our Rightness, we're self-worshippers, and closer to devotees of Baal than of God. (Take that, Herman Otten, and all other defenders of fundamentalism!)

American's God, as recognized by its institutions and its common, public discourse, is clearly not the God one sees crucified in the place of those thrown down from atop the holy mountain to swim in the dung-pit with our Moabite enemies (to borrow from the the image of the Isaiah 25 text for Sunday before last—but the verses just beyond the appointed lesson). America's God is not the God whom we find with us, already here awaiting us in the ruins, crucified and left behind in the sea of indebtedness we find beneath our collapsed economy, the one

in which we trusted for making our life meaningful.

Here, among the crucified, we find our place of worship and praise. This is where we spend ourselves as coins of a realm THE MARKET cannot touch. If America could truly know God, she/we would find God down here, in the ditched places of economic collapse, down here in the region of broken dreams, broken people, broken body, and spilled blood—down here where we die, and yet we sing.

References:

1

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/anthropological_quarterly/v075/75.2_angrosino.html

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

[NiednerCrossingsPresentation \(PDF\)](#)