

The identity of God, and why I believe in your God, if not mine

Sometimes I think of my Roman Catholic mother attending Easter week services, during her all-too-brief years with her children. For one who has moved away from her faith, in my case toward something like pantheism, I wonder how awkward that topic would be if I could talk to her again now...

I recently read James Michener's *The Source*, a story of the Hebrew/Jewish people and their ancestral land that is now Israel. This is an impressive and gripping work of historical fiction, deeply researched, published in 1965. In one vignette, a Hebrew tribe marches out of the desert into Canaan, carrying the invisible yet omnipresent Yahweh in their hearts and minds. Yahweh commands and prescribes customs, laws, and rituals. Although a fiction, the portrayed Hebrew beliefs resonate with something I've suspected for a long time, that the myth of Yahweh was of highest importance, even more so than the truth of Yahweh. For Yahweh was the deified manifestation of the Hebrew people. Yahweh was their identity, the face of the collective tribe.

I suspect that this is so throughout most of history, that God is less about theology and more about identity. An ouroboros of God creating man, and man creating God.

And this is the source of the discomfort when you say you don't believe in someone's God. You are saying you don't believe in them. Many who stand in their faith feel this identification, and this is why denying or challenging their religion is tantamount to denying their existence.

I do not know if supernatural beings exist, but I do believe in religion as a cultural identity myth. And there's that poor bastardized word: myth. If ever there is a great enemy, as some Christians say, what has happened to that word, becoming synonymous with a falsehood, would be the greatest of his works. For it robs us of mystery, story, and meaning. Nothing is more real than that, transcending even veracity.

If humans are indeed hyper-social creatures (see *Whip it good*), a Being projected into the sky out of the brains and hearts of a group can have stupendous polarization power. We don't eat that or we do wear that or we whatever because the face in the mirror in the sky says so when we look up moving our lips in unison as we pray. Behavior guided not by rationality but by identity preservation. Myths are the scripts that each must play out.

The Jews are a remarkable example of this. Anticipating and adapting to diaspora, the dense hedge of the Talmud and the rabbinical caste preserved and protected the Jewish identity through centuries of wandering.

This lack of borders may be a reason why pantheism is not as appealing as some other beliefs. Everything is on the inside of God, so where can you point to that which is not self? And without these lines, what is my identity?