

# Divine Beings By The Bushel

## *How to speak and write about gods*



*Why do so many nonbelievers help Jews, Christians and Muslims promote the idea that only one god matters?*

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**By Guy P. Harrison**

There is a powerful bias in the West that taints almost every discussion, debate, analysis and casual conversation about religious belief. Based on how they speak and write, most people clearly think that Yahweh-Jesus-Allah (endnote) is the only god on the table, the only god worth believing in or worth challenging. This “God”, always uppercase and singular, is the standard reference point. One rarely hears any mention of all the other gods who are no less likely to be real. Perhaps half of the world’s population currently believes in Yahweh-Jesus-Allah to some degree, so it is easy to see why so many people forget, never know, or simply choose not to include other gods in their words and thoughts. Not only is there strength in numbers, it seems, there is a lot of ignorance and bias, too. But while the limited perspective of believers may be predictable, what in the world is going on inside the heads of nonbelievers? Why are most atheists so passive and cooperative in promoting this idea that only one god is worthy of attention?

It is time for these nonbelievers to reconsider whether or not they should continue going along with the arrogant assumption that Yahweh-Jesus-Allah is the only show in town. After all, this bias helps Jews, Christians and Muslims promote their god at the expense of all others. It aids irrational belief by unjustifiably inflating the likelihood of one god being real. It matters when “God” consistently gets top billing from both his fans and his skeptics alike. It helps to give his existence the illusion of credibility. No less important, the “God” bias is insulting to anyone who worships a different god. It also is outrageously dismissive of past people and cultures who believed in other gods.

The not-so-subtle suggestion that only one divine being is worth believing in, analyzing, defending, studying, discussing, debating or challenging is the norm in North America and Europe today. Amazingly, nonbelievers are nearly as consistent as believers in pushing the bias. Virtually every broadcast or written publication about religion, regardless if it is supportive or skeptical, focuses on the Jewish-Christian-Islamic god as if all others are irrelevant and less likely to exist. An unfortunate result of this massive slant is that most information consumers are left with a very narrow view of religious belief. Instead of attempting to make sense of a species that has claimed the existence of unknown thousands of very different gods, they are left to ponder the existence or nonexistence of only one god, “The God”. This unfairly skews the challenge and gives Judaism, Christianity and Islam a tremendous head start. In many cases, it is a head start that reason and skepticism have no chance of overcoming.

Jews, Christians and Muslims benefit from keeping the god concept singular and simple because it is easier to believe, easier to defend and more difficult to let go of a god that dominates all others to the point of invisibility in popular culture. I suspect that one of the primary reasons so many Jews, Christians and

Muslims develop such high levels of confidence in their god's existence is because they are never forced to confront and assess all the nearly identical justifications made for believing in other gods by believers outside of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It may seem unlikely given the daily headlines, but these three religions are remarkably in sync and cohesive when it comes to promoting their god. Yes, there is intense controversy and conflict between them but all that noise is not disagreement over the existence and supremacy of Yahweh-Jesus-Allah vs. another god or other gods. They all agree that their shared god is real. Sunni, Shia, Baptist, Catholic, Reform Jew and Ultra-orthodox Jew can all hold hands around the campfire on that one. Their problems stem from splitting hairs over what their god wants and who speaks for him on Earth. By speaking of "God" rather than "gods" whenever the subject of religion comes up, they can more easily ignore the critical questions about this god's assumed existence and supremacy and instead bury themselves in the distraction of endless details about what he wants us to eat, who he wants us to love, to kill, etc.

As for nonbelievers who consistently speak and write about "God", where exactly do they think all the other gods have gone? One would think they would refuse to give Yahweh-Jesus-Allah exclusive status in the name of accuracy and fairness, if nothing else. What about Hinduism, for example? Did someone recently disprove the existence of all those colorful and unique gods? If so, how was it done and why hasn't anyone informed the billion or so Hindus who still seem to think they are real?

What about contemporary tribal people who believe in many gods other than the Jewish-Christian-Islamic god? Why aren't their magical beings given equal mention in those BBC reports that delve into the role of "God" in today's world? Of course, mentioning the names of a million or so gods may not work well for a three-minute news package, but one could always go with "gods", plural and lowercase "g". Why do CNN reports that tackle the issue of "God vs. science" always present the view that only one particular god, "God", may have created the universe and life on Earth? Has someone ruled out the possibility that it was a committee of gods or some other god's solo act? Other examples of the glaring "God" bias include these news titles: "The God Debate," Newsweek; "God, Under a Microscope," Washington Post; "Scientists Speak Up on Mix of God and Science," New York Times.

Could this bias have anything to do with racism and ethnocentrism? After all, it does seem like gods who are exclusively worshipped by non-white people are arbitrarily disqualified from consideration by broadcasters, writers and debate organizers. More likely, however, this comes down to nothing more than power. It's probably a case of, "he who wins the wars gets to name the god." But when "objective" news sources favor Yahweh-Jesus-Allah over all others—without any credible reason for doing so—they seem to advocate the popular assumption that the god of today's militarily and economically powerful societies is somehow more likely to be real. Since journalists, editors and commentators never offer compelling evidence or argument for their bias, one is left to assume that the association with power is enough. So, the Mayan Jaguar god, it seems, is left out of all media reports and discussions about miracles and the end of the world simply because no society with a nuclear arsenal finds him appealing at this time. If this is what lies behind the "God" bias then thoughtful nonbelievers who seek to challenge religious claims certainly have no business going along with it.

Why are so few nonbelievers today willing to speak for the countless gods who have lost their star power over the centuries? These faded gods were once confidently believed in by intelligent people throughout history and deep into prehistory. If most gods are eternal, as many of their believers have assured us they are, then why are "past" gods omitted from discussions? No one yet has produced the dead body of a genuine god so maybe they are still in the game, every bit as much as Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. Good skeptics are supposed to operate on evidence and reason. What exactly is the evidence and reason that supports dominating every discussion about belief with talk of Yahweh-Jesus-Allah, rather than Ninurta (Mesopotamian god of thunderstorms)?

Perhaps this support of the "God" bias comes from a flawed hunch that popularity somehow determines a god's reality. But numbers of followers is not a very good reason to ignore one god and focus on another when assessing the claims of religious belief. Just because one god may not be an A-list deity at this moment should not matter. Times change and people are fickle. Who knows what the future holds for today's hot supernatural beings. For example, the gods of ancient Greece are staging a comeback right now, having recently won the right to be legally

worshipped in Greece once again. No one knows who will be the most popular god or gods a century from now. Believers may always be with us but gods come and go. Besides, if the analysis of belief comes down to nothing more than a popularity contest, then no discussion or debate is needed to seek truth in matters of religious claims. We can all just agree to take a headcount and go home. Furthermore, it does not matter that many gods have slipped from favor because none of them were dethroned by scientific proof of their nonexistence or scientific proof of a rival god's existence. For all we know, they are still out there somewhere and every discussion and debate should acknowledge their claims to reality every bit as much as it does the question of whether or not Yahweh-Jesus-Allah might be real.

Some believers and nonbelievers claim that references to "God" are not necessarily specific to Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. They say "God" can be interpreted to mean some vague creator god that encompasses all belief systems. Pleasing as that notion may be to some ears, however, it just doesn't work. Attempting to condense all gods into "God" contradicts specific claims made by millions of people, past and present who have believed in numerous gods who cannot possibly be Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. In North America and Europe, when lecturers, authors, broadcasters and people on street corners bring up "God", they mean Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. No one honestly believes they are naming Athena, Minerva and Aralo, too.

The greatest mystery here is why so many of even the harshest critics of supernatural claims fall into the trap of monotheistic speak. One can easily understand why devout Jews, Christians and Muslims do it. In their minds, "God" is the beginning and end of everything. It is practically their duty to be dismissive of other gods. It also is tactically advantageous for them to ignore competing claims as if they were never there. It is easier to defend belief in one god who stands alone than it is to explain why one god is real when so many others are not. Intentional or not, it is a brilliant strategy. Another reason nonbelievers and believers both naturally fall in line with the "God" bias may have something to do with monotheism snobbery. After all, there is this strange notion out there that says believing in one god is intellectually and culturally superior to believing in more than one god. I have encountered many monotheists who literally laugh at polytheists. Some historians and anthropologists unwittingly promote this prejudice by describing a "progression" in cultures from polytheism to monotheism. But a thoughtful nonbeliever should be able to see right through this nonsense. Referring to god belief only in the singular does not elevate anyone or protect a god from either analysis or ridicule. For example, it matters little if someone believes in one fairy or 20 fairies. The problem would be a lack of skepticism and critical thinking on the subject of fairies. Would you consider the position of a mono-fairiest more intellectually sound than that of a poly-fairiests?

It is time for all nonbelievers to stop playing the game by the believers' rules. People who think Yahweh-Jesus-Allah is real need to face reality and recognize that we are a god-creating species. We make divine beings by the bushel and, given the conflicting duties, powers and biographies of our gods, they cannot all be real. We have claimed the existence of so many contradictory gods that any believer who collides with this fact would have to agree that we get it wrong at least most of the time when it comes to religion. A short step from that admission, of course, is that if we get it wrong about most gods it is possible that we have it wrong about all gods—even Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. But instead of hammering away with this important point, most nonbelievers speak and write about "God", helping to further distance him from the pack. Why, for example, is Richard Dawkins writing about the "God" delusion when he should be writing about the "gods" delusion? Why is Christopher Hitchens declaring that only one god is not great when he probably would be the first to agree that "gods" are not great? Why is Michael Shermer debating monotheists about the existence of "God"? Shouldn't he insist on making it clear from the start that he only debates the existence of "gods" and the event program should reflect that in the title? Why is Julia Sweeney only "letting go of [one] god"? Are we to assume that the poor woman is still holding onto a million others? When PBS produced its fine documentary, "A Question of God", were they suggesting that only one god is worth questioning? Of course, prominent freethinkers such as Dawkins, Hitchens and Shermer know all about the awkward truth of other gods and other belief systems, and they do raise the point often, but too much work that is skeptical of religious claims is phrased in ways that fuel the confidence of uninformed believers who can't see past the glare of their one god.

I suppose I should be grateful to live in an age when so many people are speaking out for reason and skepticism. But when I see the line of attack utilized by many atheists today, I can't help but think to myself, "Nice work, guys, only a million more gods to go." Skeptics can make a deeper and more lasting impact if they consistently focus on the reasons people give for believing in a god—any god—rather than getting bogged down in talk about one specific god all the time. The problem is not Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. The problem is that most people are not aware of how easily it is to be snared by irrational beliefs.

Every oral and written presentation made by critics of religious belief should include strong and reoccurring statements about humankind's love affair with numerous gods, both present and past. Use of the phrase "a god or gods" should be standard when discussing religious belief. "God", it should be made clear, refers only to Yahweh-Jesus-Allah. In any general discussion of belief, a reference to "God" instead of "a god or gods" supports the bias. It is also loose and sloppy language. Those who say, "I do not believe in God", for example, reveal nothing about their position on most gods. They also keep Yahweh-Jesus-Allah at center stage and in the spotlight. Use of "God" instead of "a god or gods" is capitulation to a cultural bias that should be embarrassing to nonbelievers. Skeptics who hope to bring more enlightenment to the world cannot afford to go around reinforcing the message that claims for one god are more likely to be valid than claims for others. Giving Jews, Christians and Muslims an easy pass on this gives up too much without a fight. No general worth his epaulettes would surrender 99.9 percent of the battlefield before the first shot is fired. Yet this is precisely what most nonbelievers do. Believers must be confronted to no end with the fact that humans are very good at inventing gods, lots of them. Nonbelievers should be the last people to protect them from this truth about our long-time love affair with unproven gods. Yes, some critics of religious belief do make an effort to toss in a disclaimer, noting that Yahweh-Jesus-Allah is not the only god. Many know that the best answer to, "Do you believe in God?" is, "Which god?". It is also common for savvy skeptics to drop the name of Thor, Poseidon or some other out-of-fashion god for dramatic effect. More times than not, however, these comments are delivered and received as nothing more than cute one-liners. They are quickly forgotten when the nonbeliever reverts to speaking only of the singular god with an uppercase "G" and catering to the Jewish-Christian-Muslim bias. This is not good enough. Consistency is required to make the point stick that "God" is simply one of many gods and has no more good evidence behind him than any other.

Imagine if a teacher presented a lecture on the impact of individuals throughout world history—but only discussed people who are still alive. Wouldn't leaving out Pericles, Jefferson, Napoleon, Hitler, Gandhi, Mao Zedong, etc. reduce the accuracy and value of the talk? Wouldn't such a lecture unfairly inflate the importance of the people mentioned and leave uninformed listeners with a distorted view of world history? Atheists not only weaken their case against belief in gods when they choose to speak and write about "God", they also miss an opportunity to help believers see the big picture. Many Jews, Christians and Muslims need to be reminded, or taught, that there are many different gods, according to many different believers. And they need to hear that all of these gods were thought to be very real by confident believers—despite the absence of evidence. Speaking and writing about gods in the plural and keeping that "g" in lowercase is important. So too is repeating the crucial point that no god is superior to any other by the measure of evidence and argument. Maintaining consistency on this can help the progress of reason. It may even be necessary for the progress of reason. Perhaps the day devout Jews, Christians and Muslims see humankind's religious landscape as it was and as it is will be the day they finally decide to challenge the existence of their own god.

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**Endnote:** *Most people probably know that the "God of Abraham" is claimed by both Judaism and Islam. However, some people may be confused by the idea of Jesus being the same god too. To explain this, one must refer to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It claims that God the Father (also known as the God of Abraham), the Holy Spirit and Jesus are individual beings but are also the same being. I can't claim to understand this but it's their religion and their rules so this means Yahweh-Jesus-Allah is the same god.*