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New God or No God? The Peril of Making God Plausible

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What kind of god would be plausible in this postmodern age? Taken by itself, that question represents the great divide between those who believe in the God of the Bible and those who see the need to reinvent a deity more acceptable to the modern mind.

After all, the answer to that question would reveal a great deal about the postmodern mind, and nothing about God himself. Unless, that is, you believe that God is merely a philosophical concept, and not the self-existent, self-defining God of the Bible.

That distinction is apparent in *A Plausible God* by Mitchell Silver, a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. The book's subtitle is "Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology," and Silver's work is an attempt to construct a concept of God that modern secular people will find plausible. The book is directed to a Jewish readership, but the issues Silver raises and the arguments he proposes are precisely those found among many liberal Protestant theologians. Most, however, are less candid and clear-minded as Professor Silver.



The key to understanding Silver's argument is his distinction between the "old God" of biblical theism and the "new God" of the secular philosophers. Growing up as a secular thinker, Silver rejected belief in a personal God who created the world and now rules over it. He saw those who believed in a personal and transcendent God — a God who is objectively real — as superstitious.

Yet, he observed that many people he thought to be intelligent thinkers *did* believe in God, and this fact perplexed him. Then came the big realization that these intelligent people *do* believe in God, but not in a personal God who is objectively real. Instead, they believe in a "new God." This new God is the only God imaginable, he suggests, to secular moderns.

"My fundamental premise is that the modernist has only two options consistent with her modernism: new God or no God," he writes. That sentence communicates a powerful insight with absolute clarity. Belief in the old God, he argues, is simply too laden with impossible beliefs and immoral assumptions.

Indeed, one of Silver's stated purposes is to reveal just how little deity is associated with the new God, and in so doing he considers Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann. As Silver rightly observes, the views of God represented by Tillich and Bultmann are not "substantially different" from atheism. These theologians retained "references to the divine," but stripped theology of belief in a personal God. He makes similar observations of Jurgen Moltmann's "theology of hope" and the works of the process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne. What is rejected by these theologians, to one degree or another, is *supernaturalism*.

Such thinkers are theologians who are not theists, Silver reports. Furthermore, the "God" of much popular belief is hardly more theistic. "With all the particulars left unspecified," Silver asserts, "our public theism is probably a riot of equivocations in which there are many new-God beliefs among the rioters."

God is reduced to "deep feelings, fundamental values, basic attitudes, and humane hopes." Many modern people,

including both Jews and many who identify as Christians, have, as Rabbi Jonathan Gerard related, “merely lost faith in an older and unacceptable notion of God.”

The new God is a philosophical concept that its proponents use to ground a potential for goodness in the world. When believers in the new God speak of God in personal terms, they do so metaphorically. One key insight in Silver’s book is his argument that even secular people need to express gratitude in personal terms. As he explains, “God-talk may be the only language adequate for the expression of certain emotions.” Speaking of a personal God in this sense is a “trope” or “just a manner of speaking.”

The new God becomes “whatever there is in nature that makes good things possible.” But, lest we over-read this statement, Silver adds: “God has no will, intentions, or desires.” In no sense is the new God a personal God. This God is a principle, a concept; not a person.

The God of the Bible is dismissed as a rational impossibility. Supernaturalism is itself ruled out of bounds within the closed box of the materialist worldview. Many would go further and argue that the God of the Bible is immoral — ethnocentric, violent, and oppressive. But all this goes away with the new God, who is not a person, does not need to “exist,” has no will or intentions, does not intervene in history, and is thus not morally accountable at all. The new God is not an agent who acts, and thus cannot be an immoral agent.

The old God, the God of the Bible, the God described by Silver as the “God of our fathers,” is simply not plausible. Thus, as Silver eloquently suggests, modern secular people turn “from the God of our fathers to the God of our friends.”

A Plausible God book is a brilliant exposition of the vast shift in thinking about God that marks so much modern theology — Jewish and Christian. Many theologians continue to speak of God without believing in the God of the Bible. Those who are unaware that the “new God” of modern theology is not the “old God” of biblical theism may well be either deceived or confused. Mitchell Silver’s clarity is refreshing, even as it is tragic.

We are not called upon to make God plausible to the modern mind or the postmodern age. The God of the Bible cannot be accommodated to the secularist assumptions of so many modern people. The “God of our friends” fits easily into this modern secular framework and is easily received by a postmodern culture. The God of our friends neither wills nor acts.

In other words, only “the God of our fathers” can save.

An interesting theological conversation at “[On Faith](#)” brings this new thinking about God to light in terms of what was at mid-century called “protest atheism.” In [this video](#), Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post* interviews Rabbi Laszlo Berkowitz. Rabbi Berkowitz rejects traditional theism (and divine omnipotence in particular) in light of his experience at Auschwitz.

In “[The Reading List](#)” today, I review Howard Gardner’s new book, *Five Minds for the Future*.

