

The God of Pat Robertson: Or Who Really Needs to Worry?

Michael Hardin

Pat Robertson's recent remarks regarding the school board elections in Dover, PA, brings to the forefront of the religious discussion the very topic we need to talk about but is rarely mentioned, the violent God. The violent god has a history, a history that can be traced back both east (Zoroaster) and west (Plato).

It is easy to trace Pat Robertson's fundamentalist theological agenda back through American Church history, back through the conservative-modernist split of the 20th century, back through the Great Awakenings, back through the Puritans, back to English Calvinism. The God of English Calvinism is a terrifying God, a God whose judgments are both "just and terrible" according to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

But the link goes even further back to the problems that faced Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa in the early 400's C.E. Augustine was beholden to dualism, both in his neo-Platonic leanings and his former alliance with the Manichaeans. Augustine subsumed the violent god behind his doctrine of predestination.

In any dualistic worldview, there will always be, in a sense, two gods, one good, the other evil, one that shows mercy and love, one that is retributive. No matter the divinity or the ancient myth, the stories of the gods all have this bi-polar problem, justice and mercy vie with one another, love and fear battle it out. This is the problem of dualism, this is the issue in Western philosophy, and this is the problem in Pat Robertson's theology.

His god is the Platonic god of perfect immutable being mistakenly identified with the "Old Testament (sic) God" as Robertson would put it. The god of Pat Robertson is neither the God of the Hebrew Bible nor that of Jesus. Recent articles on www.commondreams.org have highlighted the distinction between the god of fundamentalists like Pat Robertson and the God that Jesus believed in as they explored aspects of his ministry and teaching.

Herein lies the rub: there is an enormous distinction between the god of Pat Robertson and the God of Jesus, for Jesus, one could say that "violence is not an attribute of God" (2nd Century Epistle to Diognetus). Jesus was not a dualist, Jesus made a choice to believe that God, the One he expressed his faith in, was a God of Love and Light and Life and Peace, the One God of the Shema.

It is difficult to deny that even a cursory exploration of Jesus' spirituality (such as it may be recovered), evidences his commitment to nonviolence and peacemaking. His teachings on forgiveness still have much to say to peacemakers today. The god espoused by Pat Robertson and the God shared by Jesus are two entirely different gods.

When Pat Robertson calls down upon a Pennsylvania town the wrath and destruction of the Almighty, he is calling upon the bad god of Christian dualism. He cannot claim to represent Christianity for he has not yet made the one move made by both Jesus and the Apostolic Church, viz., to renounce all forms of violence in thinking and practice. To follow Jesus, at least according to the canonical Gospels, to be a disciple, is to renounce all forms of violence and judgment. To invoke the wrath of the Platonic god indicates that the Right Reverend has yet to become a Christian.

Sadly, fundamentalist media preachers, both on radio and TV, dominate and control the airwaves promulgating the ancient violent god. People are starving for a loving God. No matter which religious tradition they may share. Non-fundamentalist religious programming is a media market waiting to be born. The Internet isn't enough.

The West is experiencing a time of crisis, the violent gods no longer work. They have been exposed as nothing more than frauds. We believe, above all, if there is a God, that this God is good and loving and merciful. These are the attributes of divinity stressed in a variety of religious traditions on our planet. The violent gods, the gods who need sacrifice, who need victims, who need scapegoats, the gods who demand blood and war and terror and who justify their anger and wrath on the anvil of justice and the rule of law do not exist, except in our imaginations, tyrants made in our own image.

The “death of God” movement of the 1960’s is but a prelude to the “death of the violent god” movement that is coming. Even George Bush and Tony Blair have called upon Islam to remove the violent God from their interpretation of Quran. Progressive Christianity might say that it is best if we all did away with the violent God of dualism, especially within Christianity, but would nuance it one step further.

Progressive Christians understand that commitment to Jesus is a commitment to nonviolence and peacemaking before it is anything else, and as such, is a commitment to learn from the God who makes sun to shine on both the good and evil and rain to fall on the just and unjust, who feeds the birds and clothes the earth with an array of flora, in short, the inclusive, nurturing, loving, forgiving (thus nonviolent) deity...One whom Jesus felt comfortable enough to call “Daddy.” Fundamentalists, like Pat Robertson, neither know or preach this God. They remain beholden to their roots in dualism and are identical with the ancient heretical Gnostics that so plagued the early church.

Jesus taught that we get the God in whom we believe. He said, “with the measure you measure you will be measured” which is a roundabout way of saying God will judge us in the same manner as we have judged others. We alone are going to be our own standard of judgment. Therefore we need not fear the fundamentalists nor judge them. We might just have compassion on them instead.

Sorry Pat, but the fact is, God loves the people of Dover, PA, as it is written, “For God so loved the world...”

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