

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #1

ONE GOD: GOOD, LOVING, AND IN
CONTROL

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:4-9

The Christian worldview begins with a conviction that can be stated simply in this way: There is a single God who is good, loving, and in control. Christian groups are not alone in holding this essential—Judaism and Islam also make this claim. However, although these three great religions each worship one righteous, loving and sovereign God, there is always a strong tide against the view in secular philosophy, in religious splinter groups, and in the hearts of perhaps millions of people who may hold outward membership in one of these three great religions but who inwardly have great doubts.

The problem is that the world we actually live in offers very conflicting testimony. A reality in which we experience suffering, malevolence, dumb luck, pointless routine, and chaos poses a persistent challenge to those who idealistically look for order, goodness and purpose. Many people cannot make the leap of faith required to believe in a single, good and loving God bending history to a happy end.

For that reason, the marketplace of religion and philosophy offers a number of faith options that remove the problem of having to reconcile such a God with an out-of-control world. These options may be summarized as follows:

1. **There is no God**—The world is a play without a script, and history is the senseless babbling of a brain-dead alzheimer's patient. This is a very courageous view because the person who holds it looks reality in the face and declares that chaos rules. It is also a view that frequently leads to mental illness and suicide, for obvious reasons, but it does offer the advantage that one leads one's own life without necessary reference to any ethical or spiritual constraint.
2. **Don't know, don't care**—As in "I don't know if there is a God, and He don't care if He does exist." Some who hold this view have used the analogy that the universe is like a music box that God created and wound up, but then left alone to play its tune without divine intervention. God may have got things started in setting up the natural laws, but things are now playing out on their own. This view has the advantage that one does not have to commit to any firm belief but can logically still appeal to an ethical framework.
3. **There are two Gods**—In this view humans live between two eternal forces who are locked in a perpetual war in which there will be innumerable battles but never a final winner. God and the Devil (or the Dark side) each appeal to humans to side with either good or evil, but neither ever emerges as the decisive winner for the human soul, for each side is equally powerful, resourceful, and lasting. This view has the advantage of offering an easy solution to the question of the existence of evil.

4. **There are many gods**—We think of this religious option as belonging to primitive peoples, but in the form it was known to the ancient Israelites this view has made a dramatic comeback in the modern world. In the ancient world each nation had its own god, with its own particular personality giving rise to that nation’s culture. This god entered into contests, conversations, and liaisons with various other gods of other nations. There is an obvious advantage to being able to believe that “god is on our side,” with each tribe believing that god is completely identified with their own need and cause.
5. **Everything is God**—My computer, my soda can, my handkerchief in sharing reality are all part of the divine whole. Every experience, every event, and every idea are all part of a single cloth. I have to admit to feeling this view is ludicrous and have a hard time representing it well, but the largest non-monotheistic religions in the world, Buddhism and Hinduism hold this view. This view tends toward fatalism—since evil has no real existence, there is at the same time very little possibility of true human freedom.
6. **Humanity is God**—American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was famous for preaching the “brotherhood of Man” by which he meant that humanity as a whole was divine. That is to say that history, nature, science, and religion should be set at the service of human beings, their institutions, community and wellbeing. Although this view is not the official view of any organized religion, it has had a profound effect on liberal Christianity generally.
7. **I am God**—I am convinced that we are all born with this view. The world exists for my benefit, and I am the measure of good, and love has mainly to do with how well people love me. Most babies grow out of this view with time, only the most spoiled societies and cultures seem to be able to sustain people who will hold this view for a lifetime. Its advantages for the individual are obvious, as are its difficulties in sustaining any kind of faith community.

What difference does it make what view you hold about God, or a higher power, or a non-God? Isn’t it possible for a Christian, if by Christian you mean someone who admires Jesus’ example and teaching, to hold any one of these views of ultimate reality? Sort of. Notice that all the other religious and philosophical models besides monotheism do indeed reconcile God (or no-God or gods) to the existence of evil, but they do so by paying a price. In each of these other models, God is either not good or not loving or not in control (or not any one of the three). **In a universe where there is no single God who is good, loving and in control, I am not safe.** If there is no God, if God is not involved in the world, if God is not good, or if God is both good and evil or if God is not in control, then I am at the mercy of the chaos and evil I see in the world around me and my best hope is to cheat pain and death for a while and then simply cease to exist.

We Christians should all wear body piercings and belong to motorcycle gangs, for our faith is a faith of rebels. We rebel against the world we see, and proclaim that we believe in a reality we can’t see. Not surprisingly, many philosophers and religious thinkers have accused us of inventing the God we serve, as a means of escaping from brutal reality.

I would humbly ask those who believe this about us to consider this: if we had made up this God, the result is a God that we do not control. This God is not a “tame lion.” And, most interestingly, this God does not demand first to be obeyed, but to be loved. We can only enter into relationship with Him as free men and women, for no one who is a slave can love truly. Said another way, people can only be free if they feel safe and they can only be safe if there is a single God who is loving, good, and in control—for under any other scheme we are at the mercy of fate, dumb luck, competing deities, or our own selfishness.

But of course, our God not only offers us freedom, He also is free. Most notably, God is free to define Himself. When we are commanded to keep the commandments that God gives us, to meditate on them, to bind them on our foreheads—this is not just a matter of obeying rules but of respecting a God who is infinitely different from us or anyone else.

God is indeed not only ONE but UNIQUE. No philosopher or theologian, no matter how brilliant, could have ever dreamed up this God. Let me state emphatically, the God we have been drawn to is NOT what you would expect. Furthermore, He jealously guards His right to define Himself, and the poor church is left to cope as best it can in trying to make sense of it all. Every one of the twelve essentials that distinguishes us as Christians is a surprising self-definition by God. For myself, I have decided that such a God is the only one worth believing in and loving.

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