An Apology to Ricky Gervais **[1]**

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Ricky Gervais is a British comedian and actor, famous for his stand-up comedy, his acting in shows such as *The Office* (UK version), and for roasting Hollywood [2]. He is also an outspoken atheist. His attacks on theism are witty, but not the most sophisticated. That means it can be easy to dismiss his criticism, for which I now partly want to apologise.

When I think of Gervais' criticism of religion, I think of a favourite argument of his which ridicules the fact that any person could believe in a single god to the exclusion of thousands of others. [3]

> Basically, you deny one less God than I do. You don't believe in 2999 gods. And I don't believe in just one more.
>
> Ricky Gervais

I found this to be an asinine argument. It is intended to shut down discussion rather than encourage it (which is what one typically wants when speaking from a stage). The notion that gods such as Horace, Jupiter, Marduk, Hanuman, and Thor should be taken seriously, as they are not all powerful and all knowing, *does* seem ridiculous. By what many people intuit a god to be, they are not even contenders. Arguments from theism [4], such as the Ontological Argument, the Kalaam Cosmological Argument, and the Moral Argument, presupposes monotheism. This is something which was recognised by pagan ancients, such as Xenophanes of Colophon (who recognised that a single supreme deity had to exist, and that the drunken and debauched Greek deities could not be supreme beings). It is also recognised in diverse other cultures, such as traditional African and native American cultures, who often acknowledge an unknowable and distant supreme being. That narrows the field considerably to monotheistic religions, such as the Abrahamic religions, Sikhism, possibly Atenism and Zoroastrianism, and a few others. This takes much of the bite out of the argument. But, again, it is not an argument which is meant to foster serious discussion, only to ridicule and, at best for Gervais, instil doubt in those who are of weak faith.

Today I would like to admit that my dismissal of Gervais' statements were premature. Christians don't believe in an unknowable supreme being, or the abstract, greatest possible being of philosophy. Our God very much has a distinct personality, and is personable. Indeed, more so than any other God: He became a human, Someone one could see and touch and ask questions of. He is Someone who can be put in a "police line up", of sorts, next to Odin and Hercules and Kali, and Who can be picked out on very distinct traits, and for very specific reasons.

Martin Shaw is a mythologist (and someone who came to Christ in adulthood and after his studies into mythology), which qualifies him as someone who can speak to Jesus compared to other mythological gods. According to Shaw [5],

> Just to clear something up in terms of Mythology in Christ: what you get from sceptics is, they will tell you that there's a kind of infrastructure to Christ's life that you find in, say, Odin, or Egyptian gods, or maybe even in Dionysus. Now here's the thing: there is an architecture which you can recognise what you have that is completely unique in the life of Jesus—is where the rubber hits the road—is what he said; it's what he taught, it's what he went through. There are no other gods like that. There's no other God that has a dog in the race like our One.
>
> Martin Shaw

A good treatment of why Jesus specifically is different from other myths can be found in G. K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* (a book lauded by atheist philosopher Slavoj Žižek). I can quote at length passage after passage from that book, but will limit myself to a single passage:

> These are the myths: and he who has no sympathy with myths has no sympathy with men. But he who has most sympathy with myths will most fully realise that they are not and never were a religion, in the sense that Christianity or even Islam is a religion. They satisfy some of the needs satisfied by a religion; and notably the need for doing certain things at certain dates; the need of the twin ideas of festivity and formality. But though they provide a man with a calendar, they do not provide him with a creed. A man did not stand up and say 'I believe in Jupiter and Juno and Neptune,' etc., as he stands up and says 'I believe in God the Father Almighty' and the rest of the Apostles' Creed. Many believed in some and not in others, or more in some and less in others, or only in a very vague poetical sense in any. There was no moment when they were all collected into an orthodox order which men would fight and be tortured to keep intact. Still less did anybody ever say in that fashion: 'I believe in Odin and Thor and Freya,' for outside Olympus even the Olympian order grows cloudy and chaotic. It seems clear to me that Thor was not a god at all but a hero. Nothing resembling a religion would picture anybody resembling a god as groping like a pigmy in a great cavern, that turned out to be the glove of a giant. That is the glorious ignorance called adventure. Thor may have been a great adventurer; but to call him a god is like trying to compare Jehovah with Jack and the Beanstalk. Odin seems to have been a real barbarian chief, possibly of the Dark Ages after Christianity. Polytheism fades away at its fringes into fairy-tales or barbaric memories; it is not a thing like monotheism as held by serious monotheists.
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> G. K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, Part 1, Chapter 5

Part of the problem is that we intuit what the word "God" means, when a large part of what Jesus did in His ministry was precisely to confound our intuitive understanding of the world and of God. To quote Michael Bird:

> Most people start off as "if we know what the word 'God' means, then we need to figure out who Jesus is", but I think we need to flip that. By looking at Jesus, then we know who God is. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.
>
> Michael Bird

As Paul wrote to the Colossians:

> [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. … For all the fullness [of God] was pleased to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Him by Him,
>
> Colossians 1:15, 19–20a

All of this is, of course, grounded in the historical existence of Jesus. Many sceptics wish to deny that Jesus is a historical figure, because that would make their argument easier. But the academic consensus [6] is that the Bible, and extra-biblical sources, do provide reliable information (to a greater or lesser degree, depending the specific scholar) on the historical figure Jesus. This is in contrast with most of the gods of mythology, such a Dionysus, for which we don't have reliable historical evidence.

Christianity makes the claim that only one God became incarnate. Islam makes the claim that Allah revealed himself reliably to a prophet who can and should be trusted. You can believe in one and not the other. I reject as a matter of faith (and with informed reasons) the claims of Islam. It is not a matter of blind, ignorant, and unquestioning faith, as Gervais would like to make it out to be. It is okay to say, "I have good reasons for believing what I believe" (and not merely that the reasons make me feel good and secure).

It is also worth mentioning, as I am sure many have already pointed out, that in the Roman empire, Christians were accused of being atheists for denying the traditional gods and insisting on only one God. Many were martyred for precisely their "atheism". We can look to church fathers, such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo, who became followers of Christ after exploring the pagan religions and philosophies of their day, and of which they would have had a more intimate knowledge than we could possibly hope to have today. These people could and did draw the direct comparisons between God and the gods. And in Jesus, they found something unique and precious.

There is no way that Ricky Gervais could have heard my thoughts on his oft-touted objection to belief in God. I also have no illusion that he would ever come to know of this apology, and if he did, that he would care enough to respond. Instead, I write it as a matter of conscience, as evidence that one can always learn as one grows older, and, perhaps, as an encouragement to anyone who has been disturbed by the kinds of things said by Gervais about belief in God.

- . Photo credit: Raph_PH [7].

Categories:

- Theology [8]

Tags:

- ricky gervais [9]
- paganism [10]
- polytheism [11]
- monotheism [12]
- g.k. chesterton [13]
- martin shaw [14]
- michael bird [15]

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Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1244
[2] https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2020/01/golden-globes-ricky-gervais-

doublethink-hollywood/604486/
[3] https://www.facebook.com/rickygervais/posts/there-have-been-nearly-3000-gods-so-far-but-only-yours-actually-existsthe-others/408061229318236/
[4] https://siyach.org/node/107
[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5f5eXywDeE&t=2537s
[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee7qo9hGOJs
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