

And He shall be called....

God? Allah? Zeus? Does it matter what we call our Supreme Being?

Catholic Bishop Martinus Muskens of the Dutch diocese of Breda, who is troubled at seeing people from different faiths butt heads with increasing frequency, caused quite a stir with his proposal that we all simply call God “Allah”. God doesn’t have a problem with that, according to Muskens. He didn’t come up with all the different names for Himself. Humans did, so we could fight over it.

His statement was meant to remove a stumbling block among believers. Come on, people, he must have been thinking. Our differences only have to do with images in our heads and the words we use to describe them. After all, it has nothing to do with the Higher reality itself, to which these words refer.

Unfortunately, that effort at peace proved unsuccessful. The conflicting parties ignored Muskens’ reasonable and conciliatory proposals because to them religion is not about being reasonable and conciliatory. It is about being right and clinging to irrefutable certainties that one should never question because they might fall apart.

People like this are present in every faith. Apparently, they don’t trust that their Supreme Being is really so supreme. Or maybe they’re afraid His response to the offence will in fact be gentle, thus depriving them of the opportunity to keep on fighting.

Unfortunately, Muskens’ proposal failed to settle any dispute at all and only lured more of the righteous into the fray. Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish theologians, professors and commentators all asserted that their god could only be called by the name they gave him.

One unintentionally humorous reaction came from someone who suggested we could refer to God using the French word “dieu”. That word, as well as the Italian “dio” and the Latin “deus” is directly related to Zeus, the ancient Greeks’ name for their supreme deity. You can only imagine how that went over when the new, Christian god entered the classical world. “We can just call him Zeus, right?” someone probably asked. And the separation was born. After all, a name for something new was always a name first given to something else. And a name is not reality.

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