GOD, GODS AND GODS

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Category: Methodology

As a kid, I used to love reading old European mythologies. I was pretty broad in my tastes and didn't care if the stories were of Greek gods on Olympus or Norse ones from Asgard. I just liked the stories.

Looking back, I suspect that part of the appeal was that there was something dangerous, exciting, unpleasant even, about the characters in those stories. Zeus the father of the Greek gods was a very nasty piece of work:

- Zeus condemnedÂ PrometheusÂ to having his liver eaten by a giant eagle for giving the Flames of Olympus to the mortals.
- When Hera gave birth to Hephaestus, Zeus threw him off the top of Mount Olympus because of his repulsive appearance.

The ancient Greeks called Zeus a god, using their wordÂ *theos.Â*

Amazingly, when the New Testament writers came to write about the Triune God of the Bible, they used exactly the same wordÂ *theos.Â* They took the greek word which was used for Zeus and his unsavoury companions and instilled it with a whole new meaning.

Likewise, when the Christian message first came to Northern EuropeÂ with its unpleasant pantheon of warlike gods, the word used to describe the creator and redeemer of heaven and earth was 'god'. New life was breathed into an old word and god came to mean the Christian divinity, not Thor, Odin and that lot.

Despite the fact that the Northern European gods were pretty awful, I've not heard of anyone mounting a campaign to stop Christians using this tainted word for the divinity of the Bible. Nor have I heard any suggestion that Paul, John and co were wrong to use the Greek wordÂ *theos* when its meaning was obviously so far from the Old Testament of God.

Part of the genius of the Christian religion is the way that it can be translated into new languages. Investing old words with new and richer meaning. It has always been thus.

My colleague Mark has just written an excellent post exploring a specific contemporary example of this.

> *The same thing happens with religious words. In translating the Bible for example, very often the translators will find concepts in the Greek and Hebrew texts that donâ€™t exist in the target language, and they will have to decide whether to use a word that has a similar but not identical meaning, to modify an existing word or phrase, or to borrow a word from another well-known language (or even, as a last resort, to insert the word untranslated, as happened with the word â€œbaptiseâ€ in English). What is the best way to communicate the concept of â€œGodâ€ ? Or â€œHoly Spiritâ€ ? Or â€œsalvationâ€ ? Or*

> *â€œmessiahâ€ ? This can be a long and tricky process, with potentially strong opinions from different sections of the community, or from different churches. Ideally, the word (or words) eventually chosen will be that which best communicates the concept in question, which may on many occasions be a word borrowed from another language.*