

Name that God: In the Pledge of Allegiance

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

Before the recent fight over the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, Americans were in conflict over mounting the Ten Commandments in publicly owned places. The God of the pledge and the commandments, advocates argue, is a generic, one-size-fits-all God, in God-blessed America.

Some citizens know that one cannot simply get away with such assertions or evasions. For example, Commandment One is specific in its claim that God must be Number One. The commandments are not simple moral injunctions; they are theological claims which begin, in Exodus 20, with the assertion that “I the Lord your God am a jealous God.” Lots of luck to those Americans who don’t have this God well figured out. We are “under a jealous God,” so we have to get this God right.

One of the most serious recent efforts to venture into defining God generically is by Rabbi Marc Howard Wilson of Congregation Beth Israel in Greenville, South Carolina. His column appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* June 28. Wilson is modest and does not give us a conclusive statement. No, his is only a “threshold” definition of “God.” He asks, cannot Christians, Jews, Muslims—he does not mention the many others—agree on God? Here is Wilson’s threshold consensus: *“God, as I see it/him/her, should be understood as the sum total of all the forces of creativity and moral good in the universe. Certainly this is a definition to which every honorable person—monotheist, polytheist, pantheist, deist, even atheist—can subscribe. We each give that God different names.”*

I am ready to bet that 80 percent of citizens, honorable or not, cannot subscribe to that. Remember, definitions are also “over against.” Those who proclaim God as “it” cannot see God as “him” or—try this on millions—as “her.” God has gotta be this or that.

And what are those who want to think of God as “the sum total of all the forces of creativity and moral good in the universe” to do with this passage from Isaiah 45,

taken from the rabbi's Holy Book, as from mine: "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, *and create evil*. I the Lord do all these things." (Italics mine, and probably also the Lord's.) To me that is the scariest verse in scripture, but it's there. And because it's there, tens of millions of Bible believers can't go along with the idea of God as the force only "of creativity and moral good." The God of the Bible also destroys.

And what about that "forces" business in the rabbi's definition? The idea of God as a force does not show up in the 15 fat volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. It comes from pop culture, where the Force may be with you. It lives in New Age culture, among devotees who shun a personal God, and who might substitute the exclusive God-as-I for the rabbi's "it/him/her."

Recently I've had reason to quote George Santayana, to the effect that "any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular." He went on to say that "every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and the bias which that revelation gives to life."

Does Rabbi Wilson escape idiosyncrasy and bias? Try his generous and well-intended definition of God on most Americans, and you will find that it, like every other such attempt at generic definition, is more particular and sectarian than are the messy creeds of the "world religions."