

Nominalism

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Psalm 19:12
KJV.

I confess to almighty God . . . that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.

Translated from the mass in Latin.

Confession is good for the American soul this autumn, and Joel Belz, chairman of the board of and columnist for the Christian-right *World Magazine*, in the September 22 and 29 issues told us what sins we should confess. He was clobbered by readers. So in the October 6 issue he took back much of what he had said. In the October 13 issue, *World* editor Marvin Olasky put it all back in.

Said Olasky, “Some ministers have pointed a ham-handed finger at selected sins. It’s biblically wrong to say that sin x caused disaster y.” But Belz was not among the ham-handed, Olasky said, and should not have apologized for tying sin x to disaster y. Go figure.

What were those sins which Belz’s had urged us to confess—sins that stirred up God to punish America? He had begun his editorials by stating that the terrorists committed worse sins and, besides, were pagan. But both they and we have worshiped “false gods” and been, in our own ways, “pagans.” When Belz got specific about our false gods, his list made up the usual pantheon of pagan devils as perceived by the higher-brow right.

At fault are “a silly mishmash of relativism, pluralism, and multiculturalism” and other “half-witted” value systems. So “God has allowed one group of pagans to inflict terror, horror, and death, on another group. . . . The wages of sin get paid on God’s schedule and in God’s way.”

I forgot to mention one sin in Belz’s catalog of those noticed by God and, perhaps, by terrorists in Afghanistan’s caves and aboard American airliners on September 11: “High on our own Western shelf of false deities have been gods of nominalism,

materialism, secularism, and pluralism . . . Nominalism and its handmaiden relativism are as repugnant to God as is outright denial—and maybe more so.”
Nominalism?

I thought I'd better look the word up and discover just what this secret sin was before I went about repenting for it. My college roommate, philosopher Don Meyer, who later became my second wife's first husband, used to keep me awake as he burned midnight oil writing a dissertation on nominalism—in William of Ockham, Gabriel Biel, Abelard and, at the edges, Martin Luther.

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy informed me that nominalism is the “rejection of the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of medieval realism.” It is “a radical empiricism in which the evidential base of all knowledge is direct experience of individual things and particular events . . . the principle that the human mind can directly apprehend existent individuals and their sensible qualities . . . an extreme economy of ontological commitment in which abstract or intensional (*sic*) extralinguistic entities are systematically eliminated by a logical analysis of language.”

In his second editorial on our sins Belz did not connect nominalism with relativism but only with a “nominal” God-awareness among Americans. He ended: “There's no reason to believe that God prefers nominalists to pagans. In fact, a pagan—almost by definition—may be a little closer than a nominalist to knowing how much he needs God.” But God, says Belz, “can certainly show his mercy with equal ease to either one.” With that final sentence we agree.