

Words at Wheaton College

by Bill Menke, January 8, 2016

Conan: *What gods do you pray to?*

Subotai: *I pray to the four winds... and you?*

Conan: *To Crom ... strong on his mountain!*

Subotai: *Ah, my god is greater.*

Conan: *Crom laughs at your four winds. He laughs from his mountain.*

Subotai: *My god is stronger. He is the everlasting sky! Your god lives underneath him.*

Conan the Barbarian (directed by John Milius, 1982)

Conan and Subotai worshiped different gods. It's just Twentieth Century fiction, for sure, and perhaps because it is, it presents a picture that resonates with modern sensibilities. We have no trouble imagining warriors from a prehistoric and heroic age each owing allegiance to a different god and arguing over whose god is greatest. But few of us who watched the movie seriously entertained the thought that either Crom or the Four Winds exists.

Whether Christians and Muslims worship the same god is controversial, at least at Wheaton College. Professor Hawkins thinks so. The College administration thinks not, and thinks not strongly enough to seek to fire Professor Hawkins. Clearly, this question, involving real religious people's conceptions of an almighty god they know to exist, is a much harder one.

Yet Professor Hawkins remark was not any sort of deep theological finding. She was, instead, offering a reason why Christians like herself ought to stand in solidarity with Muslims at a time when Muslims are experiencing a wave of religious bigotry: they share some commonalities and that these commonalities are the basis for respect. This is, of course, imperfect language, yet language spoken in a world where the lack of commonalities – worshiping different gods – is often seen as justification for disrespect, abuse and even murder.

The language that people, and especially religious people, have for talking about religious differences and religious bigotry is simply not very satisfactory. But the language will never improve unless conscientious people struggle to express their deepest feelings. Sadly, in branding her a heretic, Professor Hawkins' superiors have made this vital subject even harder to talk about, at least at Wheaton College.