

“CHRISTIAN” A-THEISM

AND THE GOD I DON’T BELIEVE IN: PART I OF II

By John Bennison

At right: Michelangelo’s fanciful imagination with *Creation of Adam*,
Sistine Chapel, the Vatican, 1508-1512



“God is a direction ...” – Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke

PREFACE

A federal judge in Evansville, Indiana, has heard oral arguments in a case involving the city allowing local churches to display 30 crosses decorated by Bible school children on public land stretching alongside the Ohio River. A ruling is expected shortly.

But wait, I think I’ve heard this story before, or one like it. It was December though, and the same ACLU was trying to get the life-size nativity scene removed from amidst the giant candy canes and Santa’s sleigh on display in Bronson Park in downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan. But the year was 1955. And in my boyhood naiveté, I failed to appreciate what all the fuss was about.

Meanwhile this last month in Starke, Florida, a group of atheists -- having failed to force government officials to remove a 6-ton statue of the Ten Commandments on a public site --have unveiled the nation’s first public monument to secularism outside the same county courthouse. It’s a 1,500-pound gray granite bench engraved with quotations about separation of church and state. The group vows to erect 50 more such monuments around the country where the Ten Commandments now stand alone. Fight fire with fire, right? And, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

That’s exactly what a former Pentecostal preacher has done. Touting his new church start-up as “the first godless congregation in Louisiana,” Jerry DeWitt is using the standard playbook how to attract a church following. After he was outed when he was caught in a photograph with the famous atheist Richard Dawkins, DeWitt, who was then for awhile the former executive director of the organization *Recovering from Religion* now gathers a following in a hotel ballroom, preaching the good news to be found in now believing that all those old beliefs aren’t worth believing anymore.



Billboard invitation to DeWitt’s *Community Mission Chapel* in Lake Charles, LA

After each gathering, Jerry is also available to sign copies of his new book, “Hope After Faith: An ex-Pastor’s Journey from Belief to Atheism.” It may be the newest creed in Louisiana, but never mind. At least the java brewed up at the Hilton in Baton Rouge has got to be better than the tin can coffee found at the typical fellowship hour in the church basement.

Jerry DeWitt may be a novelty in the South, where neighbors and relatives in his hometown of DeWidder, Louisiana won’t even speak to him anymore. But by no means is he the first to brave that atheist frontier that is a growing religious force in America. Each Sunday at the Humanist Community at Harvard University

in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an enthralled congregation in a third floor walk-up listens to a preacher wax eloquently about compassion and community, music is played, announcements are made, and an offering plate is passed around. The only thing missing from an otherwise typical church service is any mention or acknowledgment of that three-letter word, “god.”

Not to be outdone, the growing phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by the more traditional purveyors of religion in America. In a recent radio address, Pope Francis reached out to include the non-believers in our midst. “The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ,” he said, “all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ... Even the atheists. Everyone! ...” While he would still presume to wash everyone in the blood of the Lamb of God, he then went on to add,

“And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path towards peace. If we, each doing our own part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. ‘But I don’t believe, Father, (someone may say) I am an atheist!’ But do good: we will meet one another there.”

It was helpful for the Holy Father to concede doing good is not a proprietary virtue, reserved only for those commonly regarded as “religious.” Nor is any kind of religious affiliation necessary to maintain a moral conscience. Recall the example in a previous commentary of the senior citizen from Great Britain applying for U.S. citizenship, who refused the required oath to bear arms in defense of our country, because she was both a pacifist who just happened to also be an atheist. U.S. customs was requiring her to provide proof of a recognized religious affiliation in order to be granted conscientious objector status.

But what the government failed to understand is that when it comes to religion, atheism is as good as any, of course; since any form of religion is simply about how you put some order in your otherwise chaotic world, and come up with a list of things you believe or disbelieve. [See *Unalienable Rights a “Christian” Conscience*]

The atheist and the theist both want to ask the same basic question: Do you believe in God or not? But often it seems they are not interested in going much deeper than that. The oft-repeated response a famous preacher once gave to a religious skeptic went, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. Chances are I don’t believe in that kind of God either.” Here’s the dilemma:

When it comes a notion of “God,” or “gods,” that may be the single most elusive idea the human imagination has ever concocted or tried to fathom. Lord knows we try! The Bible claims we are created in God’s image, and the post-modern rationalist suggests just the reverse. That is, God is conveniently created in our own idea of what kind of god is either believable or unbelievable, take your pick.

We fashion the idea of “God” in *anthropomorphic* terms so we can more easily relate to the idea; and then ascribe to such a being all kinds of desirable characteristics that might comprise this composite character. The Muslim has 99 names for God, or at least attributes of the One they call God. And the Hebrew scriptures -- without mentioning “Him” by name -- have probably come up with just as many; including the irascible “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). No wonder the avowed atheist and comic Eddie Izzard likes to talk about the full pantheon of gods we seem to invent at will. There’s the “God of Jeff,” he imagines, or the “God of Biscuits!” for example.

Yet beyond all our human ideas about what we may believe or not believe, is there anything *else*, anything *more*, anything *other* than what religious types may claim without proof, or rational types may poo-poo as having no reasonable basis in fact?

Beyond all our human ideas about what we may believe or not believe, is there anything else, anything more, anything other than what religious types may claim without proof, or rational types may poo-poo as having no reasonable basis in fact?

As a self-described *progressive* Christian, I do not hold to much of the assertions and assumptions of an orthodox and theistic *god*-ology in my own faith tradition that has historically attempted to explain the inexplicable with dogma, doctrine or a contradictory apologetic that has so consistently failed the test of human reason or relevance. [Note: An apologetic, as I use the term, is a defense of a certain idea. And so many of the explanations a Christian catechesis has come up with over the years is either self-contradictory or contrary to even a smidgeon of reasonableness.]

But – and here’s the big “but” -- I am also as yet unwilling to adhere to a kind of resigned stoicism that would constrain these feet of clay to a path that goes nowhere beyond the familiarity of my own front door; and the *illusion of certainty* that would attempt to leave me confident with my own limited horizons. I am, in that sense, as progressive; willing to acknowledge having moved beyond the place I once was and am no more; and open to whatever fresh revelation I may encounter. So with an open heart and mind, we begin.

I am as yet unwilling to adhere to a kind of resigned stoicism that would constrain these feet of clay to a path that goes nowhere beyond the familiarity of my own front door; and the illusion of certainty that would attempt to leave me confident with my own limited horizons.

THE “GOD” IDEA: GOD IS _____ (FILL IN THE BLANK)

In order for an a-theist to figure out the God in which they don’t believe, it seems to me you have to try to imagine who that God *that isn’t* actually is! A few years ago, writer and self-professed “spiritual voyeur” Eric Weiner wrote a little book entitled, *Man Seeks God*. The impetus for the book – as is so often the case with us humans – was personal crisis. A health scare and some serious thoughts about his mortality and inevitable demise had landed him in the hospital; where a nurse asked him one day, “Have you found your God yet.”

The question not only haunted him, but also implied that a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer would not suffice. When asked if he’d found *his* God yet, he must have realized it was a multiple choice quiz. *Which* “god” had he yet to find? And so he set about his own search, with nothing more than a hunch there possibly was a god out there for him of some sort or other. That is, who was the God of Eric? In his explorations he tried out various possibilities:

God is love (Sufism). Or, God is a state of mind (Buddhism), or personal (Franciscans), or far out (Reaelism), nothing(-ness Taoism), magical (Wicca), an animal (Shamanism), complicated (Kabbalah. For him, he concludes, with his “God” there is “some assembly required.”

Of course, for others who have undertaken a similar search, the exercise may appear to be the same, but lead to an equal and opposite conclusion: *Some disassembly required.*

THE NEO-ATHEIST

Where DeWitt has suffered ostracism in his hometown for his newfound disbeliefs, and Weiner calls himself a “confusionist” (where “confusionists lack the smug uncertainty of the agnostic”) and a “pre-agnostic” (one who is “not exactly sure what one is unsure about!”), there are some real heavyweight thinkers who are less indulgent when it comes to those who would presume to still entertain angels, with or without knowing it.

This would include the likes of Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) and Christopher Hitchens (*god Is Not Great*), Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. These neo-atheists of our age are referred to in some secularist circles as “the four horsemen” of a presumed apocalypse for traditional religious types! But they were by no means the first.

Where the artist/genius Michelangelo may have found steady work high on the scaffolds of a Vatican chapel in the 16th century by painting such fantastic and non-sensical depictions of biblical myths like the *Creation of Adam*, by the 17th century a new science had emerged with what the historian Jonathan Israel has dubbed the “*Radical Enlightenment*” to irrevocably alter a medieval Christian cosmology and literal view of a biblical God.

At the obvious risk of gross over-simplification, the advancements of scientific discovery into how and why things work the way they do radically shifted the basis of knowing anything from what we can say we believe based on myth and/or magic, to empirical and verifiable factual knowledge. With the increasing understanding of the physical world, what remained a mystery was desacralized and relegated to the frontiers of science, not meta-physical speculation.

This becomes clearly evident when it comes to the unavoidable task of interpreting Jewish and Christian scriptures; something from which not even the presumed literalist of today is immune. That’s when heated debates over things like creationism, intelligent design and evolution, or verification of the location of Noah’s lost ark, the funeral shroud of a Galilean peasant, or even the modern-day authentication of a “miracle” for a pope’s canonization as a “saint” become downright silly in the eyes of the growing legions of post-modern critics.



[Above: Artist Ward Kimball’s satirical re-rendering of Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, from his collection of *Art Afterpieces*, 1964]

Just evidence the vehemence with which some enlightened elites castigate rubes and bumpkins clinging to their false idols with the vain hope their illusion of certainty will assuage their fears long enough to get them from the cradle to the grave without need of serious intellectual inquiry, suspicion, doubt or despair.

Even SBNR’s (spiritual-but-not-religious types) – that is, those who dabble in divine matters of any kind -- fare little better. “They like their yoga without Hinduism, their meditation sans Buddhism, their Judaism God-free,” is the way one pious secularist puts it. The recent rise of religiously unaffiliated “NONES” (not nuns, but rather “none of the *above*” – pun intended) is far safer and surer.

But as we all know, to disparage our ignorance (*not knowing*) is far easier than asserting what we find to be “true,” whenever and wherever we would claim the distinction between what may be factually verifiable and what we find to have experiential resonance. It is only when we make religious claims as if they were factual truisms -- and then defend them at all cost --, that the price becomes too steep for all concerned. And, perhaps there is no more obvious example than when it comes to talking about the notion and nature of “God.”

“The word ‘god’ and the multitude of attributes that have been attached to it,” writes biblical student and scholar Harry T. Cook, “have become some of the more amazing creations of the human imagination.”

THEISM, AND THE GOD I DON’T BELIEVE IN

“People who -- as I have done -- have some time ago off-loaded the excess baggage of cumbersome pre-Enlightenment theology ... have found it both possible and desirable to embrace the scripture of our traditions -- not for the answers its texts allegedly provide but for the profound and pertinent questions they raise.” - Harry T. Cook

If you read the story of Moses' encounter with the God of the Hebrews on Mt. Horeb (Ex. 3:1-20) you have a strange and wondrous tale requiring a considerable suspension of belief. In the story, God is a bush. Not only that, God is a non-combustible bush with a human voice that converses with a lowly shepherd, for God's sake. This non-combustible God-bush with a human voice has an inscrutable name that suggests it is not only the source and being of all created existence; but that human impertinence need not question or doubt the power and might of this divine Bush. How so?

This non-combustible no-name Bush with a human voice is both divine and ethnic/nationalistic, who will intercede in human history to relieve suffering and liberate a people. The Bush has a hand, and that hand will stretch out and strike the Egyptians. The Bush-God is a Deliverer who will give to the people of Israel a land flowing with milk and honey that previously belonged to others. Okay, okay. If the "flowing milk and honey" bit is not to be taken literally, where does it stop? Or start? "There is a river," the psalmist sings, "whose streams make glad the city of God." (Ps.46:4)

Such a God of the Bible is a *theistic* god. People who believe in a theistic god are theists, and those who don't are *a*-theists. Thing is, when most people say they don't believe in God, what they generally mean is they don't believe in a theistic god. So what is theism?

Theism is a philosophy of religion, or a philosophy about religion that imagines there to be a deity that is both present and knowable in some sense, and transcendent and irascibly unknowable, all at the same time. Not only that, a theist's God is "super," in that such a deity is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and always at the ready to swoop in and set the world such a god created aright again (omnipresent). The theist bargains and deals with their theistic god, exchanging the benefits of favors and blessings for faithfulness; which is understood more as loyalty than trust, and obedience to some pre-described set of commandments or covenants.

Such a god is described as loving and merciful, even when the vicissitudes of life result in a loveless and merciless kind of existence. That's when the apologists step in to construct a complicated and intricate systematic theology to explain and/or explain away all the incomprehensible inconsistencies with which belief in a theistic god presents us.

Many of us, if not most of us, grew up with this common depiction of such a deity. And many more of us – based on both reason and experience - no longer find such a god to be credible. The question then becomes, is that it? Is that all there is? And for those of us who have borne a Christian identity, based on a theistic deity as it has been predominantly depicted in our sacred scriptures, can we find within our faith tradition a form of "Christian" *a*-theism going forward?

The Jesus of the gospels is clearly depicted as having the experience of an intimate relationship with a theistic God whom he refers to as "Abba" (Lk 11:9, Mt 6:6, et.al.). But if the composite character from the gospels we seek to know as "Jesus the Christ" was not himself a full-fledged presence of the divine, then in what sense do we not only accord him the title "Christ," but even believe the path of life he described and exemplified is worthy of our trust, let alone belief? Again, is there anything else, anything *other*, in which we might confer belief?

CONSIDERATION OF A "CHRISTIAN" A-THEISM

Pope Francis' open arms of welcome to atheists recently is typical of the way the Christian faith tradition has often regarded *non*-believers with the possibility even *they* can benefit from the *believer's* claim of Christ's salvific act; with the implication even an atheist's un-belief can somehow be expiated and redeemed by the heroic death of God in human form. To put it delicately, from whence does such a presumptuous and convoluted theology arise?

It seems quite often when we get ourselves in a fix, we seem to simultaneously cry out for some divine Superhero to save us, or find fault with “Him” when he doesn’t. The classical Christian doctrine of the Atonement is just such a contradictory apologetic.

If anything, the historical reality of a crucified Jesus -- as a critic of the religious establishment and a political nuisance to the Empire -- should have put into serious question the idea of a supernatural intervention of a theistic god; along with the gospel writer’s contrivance of Jesus’ blood sacrifice and private prayer (presumably uttered in singular seclusion), “Thy will, not my will, be done.”

But more so, the execution of Jesus and subsequent claim of some co-eternal divinity should suggest instead a kind of god that is power-less, not all powerful, when it comes to countermanding all our human shenanigans.

It’s that realization of the “sufficiency” of grace, and “strength in weakness” (I Cor.12:9) that Paul struggles to actualize; or that outrageous proclamation a gospel writer places on a woman’s lips with the *Magnificat’s* song of praise that lifts up the lowly, and puts the high and mighty in their place (Lk. 1:46-55). It’s more closely aligned with that crazy original message of the Galilean sage, about how the blessed 99% shall one day inherit the earth (Mt. 5:3). And, by even further implication, those who would claim a fickle certainty in their own strength shall inherit the wind (Prov.11:29).

That’s why the iconic image of a crucified Jesus hanging on a cross, while bedecked with royal robes and a kingly crown, is not only an almost laughable contradiction, but an affront to the human capacity (divine gift, if you prefer) of reason, as well. If it is indeed “God” that hangs on the cross, then it is a god that has abdicated all those common attributes we so readily accord a *theistic* god.

Furthermore, the pre-emptive claim of an empty tomb – by which a theistic god would still claim to have the last word – only computes for those theists who may still equate the metaphorical notion of resurrection with the earth-bound notions it’s merely about the physical resuscitation of a corpse, and that “salvation” is nothing more than some personal, god-like immortality.

Jesus didn’t die for my sins. But he did die *because* of our sins; because of our inability or unwillingness to love our neighbor more than we seem to love the kind of power we like to wield *over* our neighbors, including the violence we sometimes inflict on them in the name of *our* god.

If Jesus’ death is to be deemed a sacrifice for anything, it seems to me it ought to be understood as an extravagant and demonstrative expression of how a kind of disarming forgiveness – beyond all the bluster of theistic beliefs – might lead us to trust what can happen when all those doctrinaire claims dissolve by a conversion of the heart. Call it a divine act, or the best of “secular humanism,” it hardly matters in the end.

The execution of Jesus and subsequent claim of some co-eternal divinity should suggest a god that is power-less, not all powerful, when it comes to countermanding all our human shenanigans ... Jesus didn't die for my sins, but rather because of our sins; because of our inability or unwillingness to love our neighbor more than we seem to love the kind of power we like to wield over our neighbors; including the violence we sometimes inflict on them in the name of our god.

But in what sense might we then hitch our wagons to such an extravagant gesture and claim to still be both a compassionate Christian *and* an a-theist?

This is one of several questions with which we will wrestle next with in Part II:

CHRISTIAN A-THEISM: WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL I BORROW?

© 2013 by John William Bennison, Rel.D. All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit. To read more commentaries by John Bennison go to <http://wordsnways.com> and/or <http://thechristianprogressive.com>