

“CHRISTIAN” A-THEISM, PART II: WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL I BORROW?



Pantocrator Christ with orb - Artist: El Greco, 1600 CE
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

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Note: Part One in this series considered the notion of “God,” or “gods,” as the single most elusive idea the human imagination has ever concocted or tried to fathom. But we typically constrain ourselves, thinking only in *theistic* terms; and fashion our notion of “God” in an *anthropomorphic* image so we can more easily relate to the idea. We ascribe to such a being all kinds of desirable characteristics that might comprise this composite character. The Christian then proceeds to incarnate that idea with a Christology in which Jesus is typically construed as mediator and chief negotiator; to the extent such a savior is willing to atone for all our wretchedness and secure our own immortality in another existence. It’s all pretty fanciful stuff. But for those progressives for whom such a construct is no longer viable or credible, it is not simply a question of what remains amidst the theological rubble, but what *more*, or *other*, might yet be discovered? As such, we ask how we might speak to such things. What language might we use?

“What do sparrows cost? A penny apiece? Yet not one of them will fall to the earth without the consent of your Father. As for you, even the hairs on your head have all been counted. So don’t be so timid: you’re worth more than a flock of sparrows.” Matthew 10:28-30

Each spring in recent memory two house finches have returned to make a nest under the eaves of our house, outside our kitchen door. For days they toil to intricately weave together their temporary perch, made from twigs, and leaves, and who knows what else.

This year an unusually blustery series of days blew their first attempts to kingdom come. But the two persisted, and eventually succeeded long enough to lay a few eggs; only to have a brutish jay steal them for a fine feast. Undaunted, the two rebuilt, hunkered down, and were eventually able to successfully hatch four chicks. Day after day, we’d watch as the parents would leave and return to the nest again and again to stuff regurgitated nourishment into the tiny straining beaks that chirped with a high-pitched squeal, competing for every morsel.

One day I discovered Sally the bird dog curiously sniffing the ground beneath the eave, where three scrawny, fuzz-covered hatchlings had fallen from their nest. They were trembling and flailing about in distress. Not knowing if they could survive, I gently scooped them up, tossed them back into the nest, and then waited to see what would happen. Hours passed. But by nightfall I heard the familiar high-pitched chirping once again, and found the parents had resumed their task. Then with each passing day, I’d watch the chicks grow, stretching and flapping their wings; until one day the nest was empty and abandoned for good.

Telling the tale to my spouse when she returned home from work on that first day, she praised and exalted me for my great compassion, mercy, graciousness, wisdom and benevolence. “You saved them!” she exclaimed.

“You know, I did!” I replied. “It’s like I’m their savior! I plucked them from certain death, lifted them up as if on angel’s wings, and gave them back their life!”

Never mind the meddlesome fact that -- like all mortal creatures -- their salvation was only temporary, forestalling their eventual demise. And God forbid anyone should question why whoever designed and presumably continues to orchestrate this whole cosmic business would allow these birdbrains to act so precipitously and fling themselves from the nest prematurely in the first place.

The salvation business is one of the world’s oldest professions, of course. Religion routinely markets the illusion of certainty in place of what would otherwise appear to be the indiscriminate and capricious nature of all things, to allay our mortal fears; when, in fact, the most authentic kind of spirituality calls for a kind of laissez-faire trust in the face of all the uncertainty and unknowingness that deeper wisdom comes to eventually appreciate and accept.

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But that certainly brings into serious doubt the existence of a theistic kind of God that sometimes saves, if only for awhile; or doesn’t save us, because of all the naughty reasons we can tally up to condemn or absolve ourselves. It’s no wonder someone came up with the idea of Jesus taking the rap for us all.

Previously, in Part I of this commentary series, I concluded those remarks with the suggestion one of the central tenets of Christian orthodoxy -- namely that Jesus’ crucifixion somehow atoned for our collective wretchedness and put us in right relationship with God once again -- was certainly worth re-examining; in part, because it suggests a theistic notion of God which makes little sense anymore. As a consequence, it not only makes consideration of the sacred problematic, but misdirects the power of Jesus’ message by resting his authority on some sort of exclusive “co-eternity” with a “Father” God, offering true believers the same immortal stature.

THE ONE-AND-ONLY GOD OF EVERYTHING AND NOTHING AT ALL

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. ... See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah 4

It seems the world is full of a succession of all kinds of prophets and sages, false prophets and charlatans, who offer a variety of eternal truths that are presumed to be directly hardwired to a Higher Power that we can presumably neither know, nor question. It sets up the criteria by which we take any of these matters seriously to be a matter of who, not what. That is, credibility is based on the authority granted the mediator; who runs interference between us mere mortals and whomever we concoct to be the Man in charge.

Who is the one who is sent, with authority that transcends all earthly power and might? Whose lips are touched by divine fire, with tongue loosed to speak with a human voice those words that will be deemed by others to be those of a God that speaks, and walks, and talks as we do?

In the throes of some ecstatic spiritual experience, Jeremiah and Isaiah, the ancient prophets of Israel, made such a claim. According to some gospel accounts, Jesus only began his brief itinerant

ministry of teaching and healing after he'd first undergone a purification ritual of repentance (baptism), followed by a solitary retreat that included fasting and personal testing ("temptation" in the wilderness). Mohammad the prophet retreated to a mountain cave, where in a meditative trance the illiterate seeker is thrice commanded by an unknown voice to read what would become the Recitation (*Quran*) of Allah's teachings.

But in each case we often seem more preoccupied with the authority granted the vessel than the content and consequence of the message. That is, authority – and therefore power and credibility -- is contested and delegated as if it were more important than whatever inherent power lies in the message itself. Never mind the wonder of creation itself, we want to say. *Our* God is the Creator of all that is. Never mind all those virtuous attributes we use to describe our idea of a perfect god. *Our* God is the dispenser of all such mercy, compassion, goodness, etc. As such, we almost instinctively tend to think of "God" in our own image; as a *being*, rather than *being itself*.

But if you start making a list of all the attributes one might accord a "God" of our own human devising, it soon becomes quickly apparent there is an inexhaustible number of things we imagine such a god to *be*. There is the common notion of God as comprising everything that is; or at least everything we deem to be good. For how could our "God" create evil, as well? With some schizoid reasoning we quickly dismiss such troublesome thoughts. That's the work of those evil-doers, we say; against which an army of archangels wage continual battle.

Then there is the notion of God as nothingness, and the negation of all that is. Where the 20th century French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre could write hundreds of pages filled with thousands of words in a thick tome entitled *Being and Nothingness*, any number of mystics from various traditions have long-suggested a kind of spiritual nihilism. Even the contemporary progressive Christian writer, Jim Burklo, has suggested how "nothingness is the key that unlocks the meaning and purpose of everything."

Without the number zero, modern mathematics would be impossible. It is a nothing that makes it possible to count everything. Without this sign of emptiness, numbers gum up and become unmanageable. ... Zero is the critical placeholder for decimal numbers, and the critical juncture between negative and positive numbers. ... Perhaps God and zero have something in common – *matheomatically*, to coin a term. Perhaps God is the critical placeholder facilitating the essential human spiritual experiences of humility, awe, wonder, reverence, and selfless love. Without God, we risk becoming self-absorbed, stuck in our egos. Without God, we risk getting carried away with hubris and disdain and carelessness and cynicism. ... But when we try to define or explain God in terms of things we can touch and see and quantify, we chase the wind. God is vital emptiness, sheer silence, a *nada* we cannot do without. ... In order to move and to change and to choose, there has to be an all-pervasive emptiness – a precious void – between things and events. Otherwise, the cosmos would be a tight and lifeless lump.

In other words, "God" is the *nada* to all our yada-yada-yada.

But perhaps more importantly in such a paradigm, the notion of such a "god" might be known as the *other-than*, and the *more* of everything that is, including nothingness and beyond all which nothing *is* or *isn't!*

But if *that* is the case, then how shall we speak of that which we cannot express or describe? What language shall we borrow? Where the theologian, Paul Tillich, once tried to describe God as the "ground of our being," this question, I believe, asks instead about the *grounded-ness in our questing*. How so?

Such a "god" might be known as the other-than, and the more of everything that is, including nothingness. How shall we speak of that which we cannot express or describe? What language shall we borrow? Where one theologian once tried to describe God as the "ground of our being," this question, I believe, asks instead about the grounded-ness in our questing.

In college studies I became acquainted with the works of Henri Frankfurt, Mircea Eliade, and later Joseph Campbell, with the power of myth and *mythopoeic* language. Then in graduate studies I encountered a professor named Jack Coogan, who taught a course on J.S. Bach from a theological perspective. Jack was one of the most articulate people I had ever met when talking about all the ways we seek to speak about that which is ultimately inexpressible!

Then along came studies in neuro-linguistic programming of the brain and how we select and process the words we use to express what we think and feel. And I discovered Suzanne Langer and her seminal work, *Philosophy in a New Key; exploring philosophical and scientific inquiry to attempt to explain how humans cannot help but continually seek meaning through symbolic visioning.*

The whole collective process opened me up to a kind of remote kinship with those wise primitives; where the literal nature of human language found in myth-making was transposed like a sheet of music containing words, and notes, and scales, and time signatures; representing the same finite attempts and unfulfilled desire to boisterously sing such songs humans have always sought, in order to express that which is always more than one can touch, or see or even imagine.

Myth-making is hardly an outmoded craft and pastime of a bygone era. We still do it all the time in what is often assumed to be an increasingly “secularized” culture, and all the false distinctions that come with that kind of thinking. What’s important is not only the tales we remember and re-tell, but the messages they strive to express that are always meant to loose our feet of clay from such a limited and literal view of things; and instead set us on a continual path forever leading us elsewhere.

Unfortunately, such “sacred” quests all too often end abruptly; preferring to peddle a kind of religion that insists we remain in the shallows, accepting myths as factual, and swallowing them hook, line and sinker when reformulated as orthodox belief and doctrine. The Christian faith tradition is littered with obvious “theistic” examples. Here’s a big one.

PANTOCRATOR: HE’S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS

When I was once a young cleric beginning a professional career in a posh Southern California parish there was a charming older couple that were amused by some of my upstart theological notions. In appreciation, they gifted me with a mid-17th century English wood carving of the Holy Nativity. Clustered around a rather crude rendition of a babe in a manger are Joseph and Mary, ox and ass, three crowned kings, and angels circling over the parapets of a medieval castle.

Directly behind the Christ child stands a young boy, and behind him a representation of God the Father. The three-fold depiction of this incarnate deity is complete, with the fully mature Jesus-God holding an orb in his left hand.



Since the earliest days of Christian iconography, the image of the *Pantocrator* (literally, in Greek, “ruler of all” the world) has been used to depict the Chosen One of a theistic Pantocrator. The term was first applied to the idea of God the Father, but subsequently translated into *omnipotens*, “all powerful,” and applied as well to the Holy Spirit and God the Son. But by the Middle Ages, Pantocrator had come to be applied almost exclusively to Jesus as the Christ. (Note El Greco’s 17th century painting on the title page.)

The image of Christ with the funny title would endure and become standard fare when it came to our idea of something we typically call “God”; to the extent even mid-20th century vacation Bible school children like myself would grow up unwittingly singing songs to the Pantocrator like this well-known American gospel spiritual:

*He's got the whole world in His hands,
He's got the whole wide world in his hands,
He's got the whole world in his hands,
He's got the whole world in his hands.*

*He's got you and me brother, in his hands ...
He's got you and me sister, in his hands ...
He's got the little bitty baby, in his hands ...
He's got everybody here, in his hands ...
He's got the whole world in his hands.*

Incredible. For all we knew as kids, this deified Jesus had the power to bounce and dribble our world like some kind of cosmic Globetrotter if He chose to do so.

But don't think for a minute popular Christianity has progressed much beyond such a theistic notion of a "God" who is deemed to be omnipotent, omniscient, omni-present, and still orchestrating our pedestrian lives with some kind of inscrutable providential design that is ultimately beyond our capacity to comprehend and makes no sense whatsoever; so that we just have to believe – as some convoluted orthodox doctrine cajoles us -- there's a higher purpose (that is, another non-rational rationalization) that shall be revealed to us in the sweet by-and-by.

If you have any doubt about that, just listen to the kind of pabulum peddled by the long line of "prosperity gospel" preachers like the popular Joel Osteen. Grinning like the illusory Cheshire Cat, he proffers promises between the multitudes and the Divine. In a word, you do something good for God (and God's messenger and his ministry), and God will do something good for you.

Or, if you're single and looking for the perfect mate, try online matchmaking with ChristianMingle.com, With it's jingo, "Find God's match for you," the Almighty is actually a Jewish mother looking for a nice Jewish girl for her son who's too good for anyone. One can only imagine the Blessed Mother sighing over her unwed Jesus, "Oy-vay, if only the Son of God had been born in the age of the Internet."

If such a theistic notion of "God" is increasingly suspect to a growing number of folks who remain open nonetheless to searching for deeper meaning in something more than we can neither fully express or embrace, how shall we speak of such things?

WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL WE BORROW?

*O sacred head sore wounded, defiled and put to scorn;
O kingly head, surrounded with mocking crown of thorn:
What sorrow mars thy grandeur? Can death they bloom deflower?
O countenance whose splendor the hosts of heaven adore.*

*My days are few, O fail not, with thine immortal power,
To hold me that I quail not in death's most fearful hour;
That I may fight befriended, and see in my last strife
To me thine arms extended upon the cross of life.*

O Sacred Head is the haunting and moving Christian hymn that describes the passion of Jesus' crucifixion and death. It portrays what is understood to be the sacrificial and atoning death of the messiah of God in the minds of many Christian believers to this day. But while the hymn is generally attributed to J.S. Bach, in actuality the original tune was first written by Hans Leo Hassler around 1600 CE as a secular German love song!

Moreover, the hymn's text that is generally known and sung today was originally taken from a long medieval Latin poem, *Salve mundi salutare*; written in the 13th century CE, by a medieval poet named *Arnulf of Louvain*. The numerous stanzas described the various parts of the "Savior's" body hanging on the cross; of which the "sacred head sore wounded," was one of them.

Four centuries later, the Lutheran hymnist Paul Gerhardt translated the text into German, *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*; followed by several English translations in the 18th and 19th centuries. The famous hymn's *arranger* just happened to be Johann Sebastian Bach! So what?

Well, hymnody, with its own musical language consisting of notes and a text, develops (or *progresses*, if you like) out of its own tradition of creative expression. (Remember, the word *traditio* means to hand down whatever is worth passing along.) The tune attempts to elevate the text. Sometimes the whole piece that can become greater than the sum of its parts can take soaring harmonies that can otherwise feel constrained by words that have become sodden in their vain attempts to express what the heart can only feel. Perhaps it's something akin to the avowed atheist Alain de Botton expressing his love of Christmas carols for reasons only "God" alone could tell if there was such a thing ...

For a self-described progressive Christian such as myself -- who has moved beyond an atonement theology that has long-pervaded so much of my earlier religious tradition -- there remains a stanza in the heart of this wonderful Passiontide hymn that still speaks to the ultimately-inexpressible *otherness* I would still reserve for my *imaginary friend* I call Jesus. [More about that composite figure in my next commentary in this series.] The last stanza goes,

*What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend,
For this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?
Oh, make me thine forever! And shall I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never, outlive my love for thee.*

Can you not hear the echoes of what was originally a "secular" love song in this grand hymn cloaked in rather stilted language? Can we not witness the numerous poet's and musician's same yearning throughout the centuries to find yet another way with words and sounds to speak another language of the *everything-ness* of everything and more?

There are fables and legends that tell moral tales of human experience. There are parables told to move our thinking along from literal to metaphorical interpretation. There are mythic stories told in every generation, in every culture, in every age of human history. All seek to describe what is indescribable; as some of us inevitably struggle to decide if there is anything more to it all than our own limited horizons and our own front door. And -- if there might always be something more -- might the *more* of that *More* be as good a name for "God" as any other?

This is what the sages seem to always teach, with the implications and ramifications of which all the prophets speak. But it is always not just a lesson with a vision about some ethereal dream that has no basis in experiential reality, but rather a harder lesson about that *more-ness* of the real world. It is that duality of the limitation of our words and visions attempting to describe how this same world might be different. To do so, what language might we use, if not the language of myth and metaphor?

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So, for example, as I wrote this commentary I sought to find the right words to express my thoughts and feelings as our nation was preparing to observe the 50th anniversary of the historic civil rights March on Washington from 1963, and the remembrance of a social prophet and Christian preacher's who not only had a dream, but found those memorable words to express it.

A commentator this week made the observation we have all too easily forgotten that the two-fold purpose for the non-violent demonstration was to not only demand legislative action to make good on what Martin Luther King called a "bad check" that had too long gone un-cashed with regard to full and equal freedoms for all our citizens. It was also a very practical demand for economic justice through job creation on a shared, collective and national level. Now, as we crawl out of another economic recession half a century later, the disproportionate number of unemployed African-Americans raises an obvious point. One commentator this last week wondered if another 50 years would pass before we saw a sea change in this regard.

Discussing all this with a colleague the other day, he remarked "It's OK to have a dream, but dreams are cheap, and don't require a budget." I recalled the line from scripture about that perpetual season of a hopeful future where old men will dream dreams, and young men see visions. And I thought of instances of those realized dreams and visions with all the social and spiritual prophets down through the ages; from the Old Testament prophets and the Galilean sage, to Ghandi, and King, and the like.

And so I thought for a moment, and then replied to my friend, "It seems as though prophets are always said to have offered up religious-sounding dreams and visions, where for sake of convenience we prefer to believe it's all merely to be taken as myth and metaphor. But, in reality, they actually meant their words to be taken literally for a change!" Double entendre intended.

And, because the times are always supposed to be about change – from the way things are to the way things ought to be – it seems to me we need to always ask what language we might now employ to describe a different kind of "God?" What might be that *Otherness* yet to be known and realized?

I am old enough to remember the original March on Washington. I was a guitar-strumming boarding school student, trying to imitate the poets and troubadours of our new changing world. I remember listening over and over to the old vinyl LP album of Peter, Paul and Mary singing songs before a sea of people on the Washington Mall one hot August day in 1963. I remembered the photograph on the back of the album cover, we found ourselves re-telling this old story once again.



On that same back cover their friend had written a long, long poem. He was a kid from the Jewish diaspora of Duluth, Minnesota, named Robert Zimmerman. He knew about change. He'd changed his name to Bob Dylan. And he knew change was blowin' in the wind, if only he could find the words to describe it. What language could he borrow? An excerpt from his jacket cover poem:

Snow was piled up the stairs and onto the street that first winter
when I laid around New York City
It was a different street then – It was a different village
Nobody had nothin'
There was nothing to get
Instead of bein' drawn for money you were drawn for other people
Everybody used to hang around a heat pipe poundin' subterranean coffee house called the Gaslight
It was at that time buried beneath the middle of MacDougal Street ...

An that's where the beginnin' was at – inside them walls of a subterranean world –
It's a concrete kind of beginnin'
And that feelin' ain't be forgotten, You carry it with you
It's a feelin' that's born and not bought
An it can't be taught
An by livin' with it you learn to see and know it in other people
To sing and speak as one you gotta think as one
An you gotta believe as one, An you gotta feel as one –
An Peter an Paul an Mary are now carryin' the feelin' that was inside them walls
up the steps to the world outside –

The rooster never crowed on MacDougal Street
There was no dew on the grass an the sun never came shinin' over the mountain
There was nothing to tell you it was morning

But all of us find our way a knowin' when it's morning
An once you know the feelin it don't change – It can only grow
For Peter's grown
An Paul's grown
An Mary's grown
An the times have grown.

So the trio sang of dreams and visions that day. But they also sang of things much more real and tangible, as well. What language did they borrow? They borrowed the language of the prophets and sages. And they borrowed the language of a contemporary poet-songwriter and sang, "*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind.*"

At the time, religious types rushed to read in between the lines of the refrain an allegorical interpretation that the Jewish kid-poet probably never intended. "Ah, the wind," they said, "must be the Holy Spirit he's talkin' about!" A little unnecessary, but understandable, I suppose. Dylan himself would later go through a phase of born-again Christianity himself, releasing two albums (*Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*). But like great stories, good songs have a way of taking on a life of their own. Like many other artists, he once remarked in amazement he had no idea where some of the most compelling lines he ever wrote came from.

But with that early 60's tune, call it a wind that moves like some spirit, or the tangible longing for that yet-unknown otherness, there was a breeze strong enough to shake the foundations of the way things were, and blow the lid off all our society's predisposed opinions, presuppositions and assumptions. So it really didn't matter. Borrowed language led us from the deadness of what once was, but was no more, to that which for which we could not only hope, but help make happen.

Borrowed language led us from the deadness of what once was, but was no more, to that which for which we could not only hope, but help make happen.

So it is that I can still sometimes sing some of those old chestnuts from Christian hymnody; albeit sometimes with a smile or a grimace on my face. And other times, there's some old dead language that I simply cannot transpose. In this sense, the integrity of the tradition may be alive and well.

As such, I would suggest the Christian a-theist is one who not only welcomes the opportunity to leave behind that which has no life in it anymore; and with healthy skepticism and an open heart ; remain open as well to the revelatory unknown of what is ultimately inexpressible, with the best language we might borrow.

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