

The God of Our Own Creation

Confessions of a Non-theist, Part II

Previously, at Pathways: A Recap

Balancing Head & Heart ...

In Part I of this Series, “Away with God!,” we began to consider our conventional, cultural notion of “God” with a capital ‘G.’ This kind of ‘god’ is a *theistic* one. It is commonly assumed and understood to be about a being, distinct and apart from our selves. It is a “Supreme Being” who is at once transcendent; but who personally intervenes occasionally in what is otherwise intended by the same creator god to be the natural order of the all things, known and unknown.

What kind of a god is *this*, I’ve asked? More importantly for me these days, what kind of human conflicts result from such a human construct of our own mind’s imagination? [this assumes one rejects the notion some supreme being planted the idea of It’s existence in our mortal minds.]

The issue that is now front and center over my concern with this kind of thinking is how it has resulted in such exclusive claims in various forms and religious traditions; with adamant fervor, insisting on distinguishing orthodoxy from heresy, true believers from infidels. An example that should be familiar to our circle:

In the Christian faith tradition, there are the mainliners, who are good, God-fearing folk who simply accept the belief system handed down to them.

- There are hardliners who take things so literally they can sometimes literally become “radical extremists.”
- There are fundamentalists who are quite sincere, if not overly zealous; but are generally harmless, unless they become hardliners.
- There are evangelicals of different sorts; a widely diverse group that range from guns-and-Bible social conservatives who wield their own electoral voting block, to bleeding heart social progressives who actually take the ethical teachings of Jesus seriously to heart.
- And finally there are ascetics, a fringe group who, by all outward appearances, live in an alternate universe.

But the one thing they all seem to share in common is the notion of a *theistic* kind of a god; with a physical *being-ness* surprisingly not unlike our own! Theists hold to the notion of a “Supreme Being” to which they wistfully accord all the power and perfection from which we fall imperfectly short. Along with such thinking comes the inherent desire to curry favor with the “One” who can bestow such blessings.

The Misbegotten Notion of Special Favor

We currently find ourselves in the midst of the political conventions of the two major parties in our country. Speeches are framed and delivered along sniping sectarian lines; presumably in terms of diametrically opposite positions on just about everything, but claiming exclusive possession of the truth in each case.

But time and again in both the convention that has just concluded -- as well as upcoming one this week -- we’ll hear the same formulaic conclusion to practically every rousing speech: “... and may God bless the United States of America.”

It is so often repeated as to have become such a presumed throw-away line that I wonder if anyone stops to ask what in the world does that mean? Is it the same kind of favorable treatment sought not only by political

opponents, but our nation's competitors on the global stage; let alone our enemies who are just as fervently faithful in their own way of invoking favor with this one, true God?

If one were pressed, I suspect an explanation would fall along the lines of belief in a constructed covenantal relationship existing between a "Supreme Being" and, well, the rest of us. It may somehow suggest that our own righteous behavior and right beliefs -- along with, perhaps, some experienced diplomacy, or artful deal making -- will result in a better outcome when we invoke and curry favor with the One who presumably holds all the cards (e.g. "God shed his grace on thee ...")

As priest and pastor for many years, my primary role was to bless or absolve everybody (and sometimes everything) with whom I came in contact. I'd bless babies and corpses, baptismal candidates, supplicants and penitents, homes and boats, dogs and cats. You name it, I'd bless it. I was the human conduit through which God's favor or forgiveness was graciously bestowed. In most cases, the outward projection of such an action -- waving the sign of the cross in front of eager recipients -- was typically understood as such, I'm sure.

However, there has also been a long-standing alternative within this same tradition that has sought to give voice to a human experience that looks within -- rather than without, in our human inventions and projections of 'god,' when trying to describe that same experience. So often I wished that -- instead of imposing the sign of the cross of Christ front of the recipient -- I would have simply placed the palm of my hand over their heart; acknowledging the true blessing that already resides within, and hopefully stirred up once again.

Naming such a 'god' does not require deification or external objectification. The human *spirit* (geist) is a sufficiently *holy* spirit, in and of itself; and in unity with all else. It is akin, I think, to the monism to which Lloyd Geering refers in his book, "Rethinking God."

What are the implications in this kind of evolutionary (or progressive) frame of thought?

The exciting possibilities of a non-theist's vantage point provides more than simply a negation of theism; that human invention that is inherently riddled with its own self-contradictions. Instead, non-theism gives a fresh lens through which to understand and once again embrace some of the old standard tenets of belief (e.g. creation, redemption, etc, and even) in a dynamic and tenable new way. This could include a new understanding of old, readily presumed notions of creation, or redemption, or even the use of a salvific "Christ" figure. What kind of Christianity would that be?

This is what I'd like to invite us to consider in the next part of my thinking in this Series.

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