

Away with God!

Confessions of a Non-theist

"I pray God to rid me of God."

-- Meister Eckhart (1260-c1328)—"Non-dual" Christian mystic / sage

Prologue

For those who have known me for any length of time, who have traveled alongside me as we have shared life's journey and questions of faith in a shared religious tradition, you know that I have always taken a *progressive or evolving* approach to all such matters. To some, that may have seemed a little strange; given the significant number of professional years I spent in the ordained ministry; presumably as an apologist for the entrenched or standard orthodoxy ("right thinking") of one particular religious tradition.

In graduate studies over 4 decades ago, I theorized about the notion of cyclical expansion to all our explorations; where we can incorporate some the traditions of the past, leave other parts behind, and remain open to new, revelatory discoveries; either of our own devising, and/or as gifts gratefully acknowledged and received. In addition —while I have never believed or insisted there was only way to entertain or confess certain religious beliefs — I *have* always believed in the inherent danger of such thinking.

While it is apparent that religiously-infused thinking and speaking seems an inevitable and unavoidable human endeavor, it is when we distort such *myth-based thinking* and the metaphorical language used to express such thinking a finite and literal way, that what is presumed to be life-enhancing becomes instead something that is not only deadly-serious, but lethal.

As my thinking has consequently progressed and evolved, I have reached a point of reflection that we have come to another fork in the road; where for too long the employ of religious rhetoric and practice has become so irrevocably distorted and misused, as to make its further usefulness ineffective, dangerous and destructive. This includes the word and notion so bandied about, 'god.'

[Note: what I colloquially refer to as a fork in the road, others more sophisticated than I have called the Second Axial age. More about that as we proceed.]

The starting place for me in this next part of the journey begins with a re-thinking of the commonly assumed understanding and use of theism, and the 'god' represented by such a notion. This commentary draft is the beginning of what I intend to be a larger and far more complex conversation.

Confessions of a Non-Theist, Part I

"Our thoughts and prayers are with you" is the standard condolence message reiterated each time disaster strikes; such as the most natural disaster -- this week it was flooding in West Virginia -- or the horrific act of human violence in Orlando just a week ago that has become numbingly routine.

The father of a wounded survivor of that latest and worst mass shooting so far tearfully related to a cable news reporter how he told his son his wounded son that he had evidently been spared by "God" for a greater purpose; and that the boy's task now was to discover what that was.

As a father myself, my heart ached for the man who sought to make sense out of such senselessness. But with all such explanations, the inconvenient lingering question regarding those who were *not* spared the unspeakable consequences of human volition was left unanswered. So what? Their lives had no hidden purpose, yet to be discovered? If so, what kind of a god *is* this?

One answer is the one provided by a survivor of another natural disaster just two weeks ago. When Rebecca Vitsmun from More, Oklahoma heard the warning a tornado was imminent and headed straight towards her and her infant child, she climbed into their bathtub and pulled a mattress over their heads. Instinctively, she then changed her mind, grabbed the kid, jumped in the car, sped onto a nearby freeway and headed in the opposite direction from the impending whirlwind as fast as she could. After the storm had passed, she returned to what remained of her home, with a bathtub filled only with debris.

A CNN reporter on-scene interviewed the survivor. After hearing the harrowing tale, they remarked, "You gotta thank the Lord. Do you thank the Lord?" Taken aback, the woman smiled and replied simply, "I'm an atheist."

Whether one believes, or doesn't believe, in such a culturally-conventional notion of "God" with a capital 'G,' it is a *theistic* notion and invention. It is about a "Supreme Being," who is typically understood to be transcendent, omniscient, omnipotent, eternal and unchanging; but who – at the same time – is believed, hoped or pleaded with to personally intervene occasionally in what is otherwise intended by this same creator-god to be the natural and transitory order of everything other than this god.

But what kind of a god is *this*? More importantly, why does it matter? It matters because of the state of human affairs in which we find ourselves, time and again; but nowadays with an even more heightened sense of awareness about the extremist thoughts, actions and reactions in which we increasingly feel engulfed by religiously-inspired, religiously-infused, religiously-motivated, religiously-excused extremism. And all based on what I suggest is a *theistic* notion of however one would attempt to define and understand a humanly-imagine and devised notion of the term 'god.'

It is theism that has resulted in the kind of contrived human constructs that routinely and historically result in such adamant -- even "radicalized" -- belief systems that typically insist on demarcating orthodoxy from heresy, and true believers from infidels. Each theistic-based faith tradition contains within it their own scriptures considered to be divinely inspired, condemn non-believers, and condone their violent demise (both the Bible and the Koran, for example, contain such sanctioned passages). It sets up the *we/they* dichotomy. If only *they* believed as *we* believe what has been divinely revealed to *us*, then we wouldn't have a problem, now would we?

If, for example, a former Muslim has a change of heart, converts to Christianity, sincerely accepts Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and becomes a Presbyterian like Donald Trump, might not the candidate -- not unlike St. Peter at the Pearly Gates -- rescind his idea of a ban on everyone he's somehow able to figure out is a Muslim who used to hate us but doesn't anymore, and allow them to enter his country?

While this is the kind of extremist (and theistic) thinking that can result from such nonsense, *a-theism* (or its cop-out cousin, *agnosticism* "I-don't-know-what-I-don't-know") is only the flip side of the same dead-end debate that goes nowhere. In between theism and a-theism, there have been many other ways throughout the course of human history humans have tried to create a god of our own imagining; if not in our own image.

Before there were humanly-devised religious constructs -- let alone scientific inquiry that should have dispensed with all such long-lingering pre-scientific notions -- there was, within each culture, a body of knowledge that explained otherwise inexplicable, but natural, phenomena. The forces of nature were imagined to be gods who displayed human personalities that -- wouldn't you know it -- seemed an awful lot like us!

The god of thunder was an angry god to be feared. The god of springtime was one to be worshipped for the gift of rejuvenation and regeneration. And, when humans couldn't figure out exactly what they might attribute something, there were always assumed to be gods of inscrutable mystery! The tales that arose to understand and explain such phenomena were mythic in nature; and fully credible (believable) as such.

There was *pantheism* and *panentheism*. Such a pantheon of gods constituted *polytheism*. In addition, there evolved other variations, i.e. *deism*; sort of a nature-based form of atheism, rejecting revelation and finding anything deemed sacred to be found in observable natural phenomena.

But because each culture had its own version or variation of this universal approach to humans striving to understand the world around them, certain tribes came to claim there was one god that not only happened to be *their* god (*henotheism*); but that theirs was the “God of gods, and Lord of lords.” This, for example, is the imagined god of the twelve tribes of Israel, who establishes a unique covenant relationship: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

Instead of many gods reflecting and expressing an understanding of all the different human emotions and experiences, there was now one god (*monotheism*) that incorporated all those previously-distinct (and often contradictory) attributes we imagine in a biblical deity who creator, redeemer, sanctifier, judge and jury; who is both angry and wrathful sometimes, compassionate and merciful other times, but always present, yet out of reach unless we repent and mend our ways; or rely on grace to save us since we can't really save ourselves!

If that sounds a little bit like biblically-based orthodox Christianity, you get my point.

In his books with such titles as, Christianity Without God and Reimagining God, author Lloyd Geering argues orthodox Christianity, when examined is not really theistic anyway. Christianity, he believes, should instead not only be seen as *humanistic*, but also as a rejection of theism. More about this in more depth another time.

But he, and others of his ilk and persuasion have been a fringe group of voices in what would typically be considered mainstream contemporary Christianity. Ever since the infamous “death of God” debates a half century ago (the title used by John A.T. Robinson, or Thomas Altizer's The Gospel of Christian Atheism), there have been biblical scholars, thinkers and theologians who have attempted to call out scriptural literalists as heretics (Jack Spong's numerous writings, for example) and propositioned in various ways a different way to define a different notion of “God” that does not distinguish whatever is deemed sacred from secular, good from evil, or divisiveness and otherness from union, harmony and wholeness.

This is not, however, an exclusively modern or post-modern phenomenon. The Christian faith tradition has long held within in those generally-unwelcome voices of so-called mystics and other presumed oddballs who observed and borne witness to the essential dangers and limitations of theism as a framework for religious thought. I believe it is something Meister Eckhart had in mind when he sought to be rid of a certain ‘god.’

How then can we speak of what we can only imagine, acknowledging the reality that it is all only up to our own imagination. This is the premise upon which I begin this series and conclude Part I. Who, or what, is the god of our own imagining? Our own creation?

In the absence of a better label – and until something more comes along in this evolutionary thought process – this *non-theist* will confess and share what's left. And what offers the possibility of so much more.

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