

Adios, “Dios,” Part I: Saying Goodbye to “God” in Sacred Text

By John Bennison, Rel.D



Prologue: What Good is “God”?

In a single week recently, a born-and-raised Mancunian (that is, a citizen of Manchester, England) who’d become “radicalized” by a religiously inspired ideology about God, infidels and heavenly rewards blew himself up at a pop concert; killing and maiming dozens in what a terrorist organization called a response to the “crusaders” in the West. Almost simultaneously in Cairo, a bus filled with Coptic Christians on pilgrimage is sprayed with machine gun fire by ISIS-inspired terrorists, killing 28. Headlines in subsequent weeks have brought with it a familiar, repetitious and numbing effect to the point of ambivalent fatigue.

One can argue how much of the carnage is due to geo-political-economic conflict and age-old ethnic/tribal warfare. Or how much of it is a perverse and distorted *religious* crusade. But in the lethal mix of these human thoughts and actions, there is undeniably a humanly concocted notion of “God.”

In my last commentary, I suggested we might do well at this point in the journey to consider leaving behind the *theistic* notion of “god.” But before doing so, one might ask how did all the different ideas and conceptualizations of however you define that term arise? Was it humanly generated, or was it something that was planted in our consciousness by some supernatural force?

If one is able to even entertain the unlikeliness of that second option and consider the first, it raises a larger question by its implications. If “god” is, in fact, an idea, a notion, an invention, or even a figment of human imagination, what does that mean for all those attributes once accorded such a deity -- or deities -- of one sort or another?

OMG! If we were to delete both our traditional Western word and notion of “god” – not just as a supernatural being, but all the substitutionary replacement ideas we’ve concocted so far -- from both our speech and thinking, what are the implications for such things we ourselves know and experience to be true in our own human experience? I’m talking about conceiving of such things as love, compassion, mercy, grace, reconciliation, forgiveness, even absolution, redemption, and salvation.

Just try experimenting with this intriguing idea: If one deletes that one word that -- I would suggest -- has become so laden and problematic from the best ideas we’ve come up with to try to express and describe that very term, can those aforementioned attributes stand on their own without it?

For our first experiment, let’s begin by turning to a well-known and well-loved gospel text; revered as sacred in the Christian faith tradition. In subsequent experiments we’ll explore the implications for other cornerstones of Christian faith like prayer, sacramental rites and ritual, even worship.

This is not easy. It makes me wonder if we’re shaking the foundations. If we remove what has been envisioned to be the central pillar, will the walls come tumbling down, leaving only rubble and dust? But then again, we are the dust of the earth, and we return to dust. So consider if a heaven on earth isn’t sufficient to fill the void, both now and for this time of simply *being*?

Have we reached a place in this journey, where we can look back on the littered path of human history we have trod, and sincerely ask what good is “God?” Might it not be better to simply leave an empty space, if we can tolerate such an idea?

Saying Goodbye to “God” in Sacred Text

In our Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the word “god” is biblically understood in theistic terms. *Mono-theistic* to be exact. That is, there’s only *one* “god,” Yahweh; who is the supernatural creator of everything, oversees everything, and will redeem everything in the end for those who keep covenant and believe. Along the way, there are certain ways we are to behave in order for the Almighty to make good on His end of the deal. A risen Lord, Jesus Christ / Messiah, is not only the example set for us, to emulate as best we can in word and deed; but the living proof, as well. How exactly he is still “living” is a matter of unending theological debate. But the “Spirit” of Yahweh presumably blows where it wills to sustain us in the meanwhile. And if we fall short (which we will, and do), the unmerited gift of grace will pick us up again, thank God; despite all our worthlessness.

There you have it. In a single paragraph I’ve summarized mainline, orthodox (i.e. “right-believing”) Christianity in a nutshell!

However, the premise is also the problem, which I’ve already laid out previously; so I won’t reiterate here. Instead, I’ll rephrase the question again, asking how we might take all the best *attributes* accorded *our* deity in all *our* wildest imaginings – e.g., love, compassion, mercy, grace, reconciliation, forgiveness, even absolution, redemption, and even salvation / “resurrection” – and see just how well they might stand on their own in nothing more than the deepest and fullest *human* experience possible.

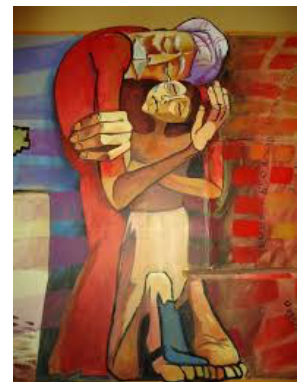
For our first experiment, we’ll reconsider a portion of text considered sacred; a parable likely told by the historical Jesus, before being passed along and eventually recorded in Luke’s gospel (Luke 24).

There was a father who had two sons. The firstborn was more conscientious, even industrious. The other was more adventurous, and probably a lot more fun to be around. But he didn’t want to stick around, and took off. When some of his life choices caught up with him, he returned to face the music, tail tucked between his legs.

Little did he know that from the day he’d left, his father had been waiting at the gate with an aching heart, keeping a hopeful vigil. He’d spent his days glancing unceasingly over his shoulder, until he might one day see a familiar silhouette come over the far hill. And then all customary expectations would be tossed aside.

The injured party would rush to the would-be penitent as fast as his old legs would carry him with the sweetest possible homecoming gifts being compassion and mercy. No judgment or quibbling over what’s fair could be heard, let alone any recrimination. Deaf to any contrition on the part of the one as good as dead, the father’s only capacity was unbridled joy and elation. Where the best the penitent could have hoped for was forgiveness and reconciliation, there wasn’t time for anything but celebration. Why?

Because, sometimes there’s something more important than justifiable resentment, or fairness, or even faithfulness. In which case, consider just how untypically *irreligious* this story really is.



But further, the backstory to this tale is a universal story. It’s about journey and homecoming. And I’ve never known a better description of “home” than that place you can return, and – no matter what -- they won’t kick you out. You’ll never be disowned or forsaken, despite your undeserving.

It’s about being lost and found. It’s about estrangement and being as good as dead; then being raised up again to rejoin life among those living most abundantly. So it’s about resurrection. And grace. Grace as mediated by the love one human being is capable of mustering for another.

And noticeably *absent* in this very human story of redemption and making something and someone whole again, is the handiwork of any divine figure or deity.

Now, I realize and readily acknowledge I've arbitrarily selected a portion of the Bible that's probably easiest to make my point. But we also know the early Christian church's tendency to have moved such parables through its predisposed inclination and interpretation to a familiar type of adaptation; making an allegory out of such tales.

It all quickly became code language, where "God" played the part of the father, and the younger son represented the gentiles in the early Christian movement; while the role of the recalcitrant and resentful older son was played by the Judeans or the Pharisees that were at odds with those early believers at the time the gospel was written, *after the fact*.

As a result of such an allegorical application, some biblical scholars have conjectured the original tale may not even have originated with Jesus; while others view more of the layered approach, where theological motivations have modulated what was once pure parable for their own purposes.

While my little experiment to see how well the parable of the prodigal can stand on its own without divine assistance or even religious "contamination," other parables attributed to Jesus clearly include a religious tone, if not presence. Allegorical interpretation is almost unavoidable in the parable of the Sower. At the same time, it's worth remembering the religious figures in the Good Samaritan parable are cast only in a *negative* light. However, consider how the Parable of the Lost Sheep, can function just as well without any divine intrusion as does the prodigal son story.

What of the "Reign of God?"

But how can the "kingdom" parables – the majority considered original to the Galilean sage – possibly be reconsidered without including "God?" "The kingdom of God," Jesus says in the most familiar English translation, "is like a lost coin, a mustard seed, buried treasure, a pearl of great value, etc."

Consider the fact that such a "kingdom" (now more often translated "reign") is, of course, a *vision* of the *human* imagination; as conceived by the sage who sketched it for us, and the evangelists who recorded it. Further, the kingdom parables are always a juxtaposition of the way things are, and *ought* to be.

These parables are similitudes; meaning, they describe what it would be like if only those things to which we aspire came to pass, and with the human capacity we possess to achieve them. Consider this is what Jesus implied when he spoke of such a kingdom as this being imminent, or at hand; if only we were to use the eyes we already had to see, and ears to hear.

Clearly the Bible is a compilation of different kinds of recorded stories, covenant histories, theological treatises, gospel proclamations, letters, poems and sagas, and even hallucinogenic dreams, that are all intended to reflect two great mono-*theistic* faith traditions.

Over the different centuries of its compilation, the biblical narrative is a story of mere mortals arguing with "God," wrestling with "God," straying from "God," returning to "God," invoking "God," pleading to "God," swearing allegiance to "God," giving thanks to "God," loving "God," cursing "God," fearing "God," fleeing from "God," and -- on more than one occasion -- just being utterly confounded by "God," and exasperated with "God."

It's about a kind of resurrection and grace as mediated by the love one human being for another. And noticeably absent in this very human story of redemption and making someone whole again, is the handiwork of any divine figure or deity.

If one then considers the possibility that the notion of “god” described in the whole biblical story is the creation of a human document borne out of human experiences, it seems plausible to perhaps take another look at all those stories, and recognize how familiar they are when we recount all the ways in which we have dealt and interacted with one another!

In place of the word “God” in the foregoing paragraph, try the word “you” or “me.” Delete a supernatural deity, and see what’s left, or whatever might really be missing.

Then, if we come to the realization that “god” is really only imagined and meant to be the representation of the best of ourselves -- in relationship with one another -- how might saying *adios* “*Dios*” in the journey we’ve undertaken not only *un*-encumber us a bit and quell some of the violence we inflict on one another in such a name and notion? And further hasten, as well, the coming of that kingdom once, and so long, envisioned.

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