
CHAPTER 1

OVERTURE

A Note on My Provenance

When I knelt on the marble floor of the chapel in Rome and heard the bishop intone over me, “Tu es sacerdos in aeternum” (you are a priest forever), I could never have imagined I would one day write this book. In these pages, I argue against the existence of a personal god, the divinity of Jesus, and the belief that continued living is the sequel to death. I find no persuasive arguments for any of those hypotheses.

The guiding maxim of my intellectual journey has been to follow the truth wherever it beckons.

My years as a professor have been almost exclusively in Catholic universities. I taught at Villanova University and at St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore. I taught at the Catholic University of America, held the John A. O’Brien Chair in moral theology at the University of Notre Dame, and was visiting professor at Trinity College, Dublin. Most of my career has been at Marquette University, a Jesuit university in Milwaukee. I am past president of the Society of Christian Ethics. In 2014 that Society awarded me its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Early on I fell in love with the revolutionary moral classic that began with the mythopoetic Exodus/Sinai narrative and then pulsed like a building leitmotif through the maze of Hebrew and Christian scriptures and traditions.

In Parts I, II, and III of this book, I critique the Christian dogmatic triad of God, incarnation, and afterlife. In Part IV, I return to that brilliant moral epic often buried under corruption and dogmatic assertions of dubious epistemological pedigree. Much of this poetic classic is as piercingly relevant today as if it had been written this morning. It can take its place among other great moral classics, not as the best or last word but as a word that deserves a fresh hearing. It can speak again to our dangerous species' need to develop a realistic global ethic that can bring health to a planet deteriorating under the metastasizing effects of our ungrateful mismanagement.

CRITIQUE AND PROMISE

It has long been assumed that Christianity rests on three foundational rocks: (1) a personal deity; (2) an incarnate divine Jesus who existed before his birth (as one in a trinity of divine persons); (3) continued living after death. I argue in this book that this dogmatic triad rests on fatal fault lines of cognitive instability and that these imaginative beliefs and hypotheses are more loosely rooted in biblical sources than is generally acknowledged. I further contend that these beliefs are not the best that Christianity can offer a troubled and troubling humanity.

Both theists and most of today's agitated atheists get a failing grade in literary criticism, the atheists by obsessing over the dogmas and the theists by mistaking metaphors for facts. Both miss the epic poetry that moves through the complex biblical literature.

In this book, I argue that the moral contribution of Christianity does not depend on the personal God and afterlife hypotheses, nor on doing to Jesus of Nazareth what Jesus did not do to himself—that is, turn him into a god. These beliefs, though comforting in some of their promises, are increasingly questionable. They suffer—all three of them—from (a) loose rootage in the Hebraic and Christian traditions; (b) falsely concretized metaphors and a reduction of poetic imagery to supposed historical and empirical facts; and (c) a century of scholarly research that has not been kind to the underlying assumptions of this dogmatic triad. This book critiques each of these dogmas on the basis of these weaknesses.

Properly understood and critiqued, the major religions are, at their best, classics in the art of cherishing, epics of revolutionary possibility-thinking—at least when they don't get mired in their own ebullient imaginations or get co-opted and pressed into service by the societal keepers of privilege and power. Because of the phantasmagoria religions generate, it is easy for secular minds to flail at them. From Feuerbach to Nietzsche, to the new mandarins of atheism, Hitchens, Harris et al., the tendency has been to bash the dogmas and ignore the moral wisdom and powerfully relevant insights into human psychology, politics, and, yes, economics, that these tainted classics carry in their poetic train.

Still, giving credit where credit is due, these vexed modern and postmodern critics of religion often argue well—and prevail—when they tilt their lances and charge. They do make many good points and are veritable hammers of noxious superstitions. Of course, they have an easy target. Impetuous religious imagination does run wild, providing a lot of grist for the mockery mill.

RELIGIONS RUN RIOT

We must face the fact that there is nothing that stirs the human imagination as much as the tincture of the sacred whether defined theistically or nontheistically. No area of literature produces the fantastical claims that religious literature does. From Jupiter to Kali the enigmatic Hindu goddess, from sexy gods who create with masturbation or intercourse to gods who create chastely with a simple word, from the extravagant gods of Sumer to the rambunctiously misbehaving gods of Olympus, from the African god who gets drunk on palm wine on his way to a botched creation to the more disciplined specialized gods who focus on agriculture or fertility or war, the *dramatis personae divinae* is endless. As the ancient Thales said, everything is full of gods and what a remarkable and idiosyncratic ensemble they are.

The gods of religious imagination are never static; they grow in talent and in tandem with the human species. With the invention of writing they turned to script, whether on tablets of stone at Sinai or by sending angels with names like Gabriel or Moroni to write books

or leave hidden tablets. (There are as yet no divinely inspired films or videos, and no god is yet a Facebook friend.)

So there it is, a literature and a lore filled with gods and demigods and angels, with virgin births, resurrections from the dead, preexistence before conception (as some gospel writers, not all, allege for Jesus), and the ability to ascend into the skies without ever going into orbit. No literature can match religious literature in extravagances of imagination.

RELIGION'S FLAWED IMMUNE SYSTEM

In addition to exuberance run amuck, religion also invites critique and shunning because of its capacity for poison absorption. Religious thought is like a barometer, always sensitive and responsive to the surrounding atmosphere. Gentle peace-making ideas of the early Jewish and Christian movements imbibed violence in violent times and were transformed in harmful ways. Moral sicknesses become indentured and enshrined and are hard to cure because the faithful come to love them. When you are born into these dogmatic illnesses they seem as real as the starry sky above. When I was a young priest performing “the holy sacrifice of the mass,” I did not feel that I was returning to the primitive penchant for human sacrifice. Yet on a daily basis, I offered the Father God his crucified bloodied son Jesus as a *hostiam sanctam*, a holy victim, in the hope this would lead to *salutis perpetuae*, “perpetual well-being.” (The communion bread at the eucharistic meal is called *host*, from *hostia* meaning victim.) It was a reversion to the persistent ancient belief that the gods lust after sacrificial blood, with human blood being the preferred offering. I didn’t know I was involved in a playing out of old myths redeployed to help explain the embarrassing scandal of Jesus’ brutal execution.

Early eucharistic ceremonies did not center on the death of Jesus. In fact they often included dancing and were more marked by gratitude and hope rather than pathos. As Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker discuss in their *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, the first crucifix showing the dead Jesus was not carved until the tenth century and

images of Jesus' corpse were not found in churches before that time.¹ But violent times seeped in and rewrote the script and reshaped the arts.

The results of this infusion of violent theology were and continue to be catastrophic for people and for this planet. Small wonder theologian Catherine Keller could write that theology "over its complex and conflictual history has legitimated more violence than any other ology."² Crusades, pogroms, and inquisitions come quickly to mind and they are still with us, though sometimes in camouflaged forms of prejudice and exclusion, often commingled with ethnic animosities.

AUDIATUR ALTERA PARS—LET THE OTHER SIDE BE HEARD

Understanding the positive moral content of religions is a daunting challenge, especially for the rationalistic mind. Reinhold Niebuhr wondered how an age so devoid of poetic imagination could ever understand religion and its poetry-rich literary products and rituals. Poetry, with its symbols and metaphors is disorienting to the hemmed-in rationalistic mind. Symbols are fearsome things. Like pregnancy and birthing, they stretch the skin of the complacent mind and leave permanent marks. But they are, like pregnancy, productive. The modern and postmodern mind is often dull when it comes to the wisdom of the heart, which is central to poetry and to one of its offspring, religion.

Art and religion were linked at their birth. As Karen Armstrong writes, even many rabbis, priests, and Sufis would say that "in an important sense God was a product of the creative imagination, like . . . poetry and music." Her research shows that "Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art." Fear often engenders gods "to propitiate powerful forces" people did not understand. For many, theism functions as a kind of parental bulwark against meaninglessness and chaos; better fictive gods than a universe functioning without personalized divine oversight. Yet, as Armstrong says, there was more to the religious impulse: like art and

philosophy, “these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world.” Religion has always been “an attempt to find meaning and value in life.”³ It is the successes of that human quest that I attend to in Part IV of this book where I trace out the symphonic power of the morality narratives of the Hebrews and early Christians. I argue that that power is not organically linked to the theistic hypothesis.

Not all religion critics miss out on the positives of these symbolic movements. I would not list Richard Dawkins among the other “amateur atheists” of our day since he is aware of the philosophical and poetic richness that can be found in the creative efforts of religionists. Historically, the political-economic power of the Judeo-Christian moral vision won impressive praise from nontheistic social theorists. Friedrich Engels noted the revolutionary political power of early Christianity, a power that startled Diocletian and a number of emperors into harsh, repressive reaction. The threat was relieved only when Constantine was able to co-opt Christianity’s subversive power. Engels spoke of Christianity as “the party of overthrow.” He said it undermined not only the imperial religion but also “all the foundations of the state” by “flatly denying that Caesar’s will was the supreme law.” It pioneered a universalist, post-tribal mode of socialization. It was, Engels said, “international” and “without a fatherland.” It had a “seditious” thrust that very quickly led to its suppression.

Engels went so far as to see the Christian movement as paradigmatic for socialism. Diocletian, he wrote, “promulgated an anti-Socialist—beg pardon, I meant to say anti-Christian—law.” He runs on with the comparison noting that Christian symbols were forbidden “like the red handkerchiefs in Saxony” and that Christians were slowly banned from any effective participation in public life. He said the Christian revolution endured only for a time. Later it morphed into the state religion and lost the subversive power it inherited from prophetic Judaism.⁴

Lenin also compared the early Christian movement to the socialist revolt of the oppressed classes. (Both Engels and Lenin underestimate Christianity’s debts to prophetic Judaism. Jesus, after all, was a Jew, not a Christian.) Lenin states that Marx’s most fundamental

teaching was that society should change from being “a democracy of the oppressors to the democracy of the oppressed classes.” This hallmark of Marx’s teaching, he laments, became “entirely forgotten” and was treated like “a piece of old-fashioned naiveté.” He compares this lamentable defection to what befell Christianity. “Christians, after Christianity had attained to the position of a state religion, ‘forgot’ the ‘naivetés’ of primitive Christianity with its democratic-revolutionary spirit.”⁵

Elaine Pagels says that the Christian emphasis on human equality was a breakthrough idea and an open defiance of totalitarianism. “Christians forged the basis for what would become centuries later, the western ideas of freedom and of the infinite value of each human life.”⁶

But, again, in doing this, Christians were the heirs of prophetic Judaism. It was Jews, says Thomas Cahill, who were “the inventors of Western culture” since they freed themselves from the cyclical, *nihil sub sole novi* view of history, which made us prisoners of the past. They pioneered a vertical notion of history unlocking us from blind fate and opening us to possibility. Cahill goes so far as to suggest of this Jewish contribution “that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.”⁷ It broke the chains of cyclical repetitiveness.

What Engels and Lenin saw, and what most Christians do not, is that the creative social and moral teaching of Judeo-Christianity is not tied to god-talk or to Christian afterlife hopes. Indeed after-life hopes can relegate reforms to the postmortem bye-and-bye and sleight the rest of nature that enjoys no such otherworldly insurance backup. Modern Christians grouped under the “liberation” mantra do see the rich ores of progressive social theory that can be mined and appropriated from Hebraic and Christian sources and it is they—who really do get the point—who have so disquieted Vatican immobilists like Pope Benedict XVI. However, Benedict’s successor Pope Francis is singing a new song—or actually an old one. He has returned to the revolutionary moral challenges treated in Part IV of this book and has repeatedly included atheists in his moral mission. In so doing he endorses the separability of theism from the biblical moral epic—no slight thing coming from a pope.

DISTRACTED BY GOD: ATHEISTS AND THEISTS UNITED

Sad to tell, most modern atheists are as obsessed with “God” as the theists are. They are so busy *unbelieving* the dogmatic triad, and other dogmatic add-ons, that they miss the literary contributions housed in these human legacies. “Secular” scholarship generally tends to impose the violence of a prose reading on the poetry and symbolism of the religious traditions. This is less surprising when we note that none of the atheists *du jour* is a scholar in the field of religion. These fervent atheists join the faithful in reducing the infinitely varied and image-rich narratives and writings to a literal reading as though they were historical tracts or a kind of ancient journalism. Anti-poets take teachings like “exodus,” “incarnation,” and “resurrection” and downsize them, de-symbolizing them into happenings that could have been caught on film. When you mistake metaphor for fact, a metaphor like the virgin birth could have been verified by an OB/GYN attending physician.

Literalism Strips Metaphor Bare

Both atheists and theists mistakenly define religion as essentially a belief in one or usually more deities. I say “more” deities since the theistic impulse once indulged is not easily constrained to unicity. Even Christians with their avowed monotheism arrived at a “triune God” that sits uneasily on their one-God claims. No matter how hard the dons dunned, three never did equal one. Hinduism is crowded with multiple divinities and there is scant effort to find unicity at the base of its exuberant and densely populated pantheon. Islam is insistent on monotheism and yet, for some, the Qu’ran has the kind of status comparable to what orthodox Christians attribute to Jesus. Desecration of the Qu’ran is on a par with desecration of the consecrated eucharistic bread at a Catholic Mass. Deification is an impulsive penchant of our species and it is subject to mitosis. God-makers don’t easily settle for just one.

But deity-centered religion leaves out a large portion of human-kind whose religions do not believe in a deity or an afterlife. Chun-fang Yu, a professor of Chinese religions says quite simply: “Unlike

most other religions, Chinese religion does not have a creator god. . . . There is no god transcendent and separate from the world and there is no heaven outside of the universe to which human beings would want to go for refuge.”⁸ Instead, “The universe, or ‘Heaven and Earth,’ is the origin of everything, including human beings in the universe. This creating and sustaining force, otherwise known as the *Tao* or the Way, is seen as good and the highest goal of human life is to live in conformity to it.”⁹

ATHEISTS DEFINED BY THEIR OPPONENTS

Take note: Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism do not define themselves as “atheistic” since they don’t entertain the theistic hypothesis as plausible and have no reason to define themselves in opposition to it as western atheists do. They don’t need a negative definition of who they are and what they believe. And they can *believe* in human dignity and have *faith* in the power of human love without feeling that those words slide them into theism or some fanciful supernaturalism or life-after-death imaginings.

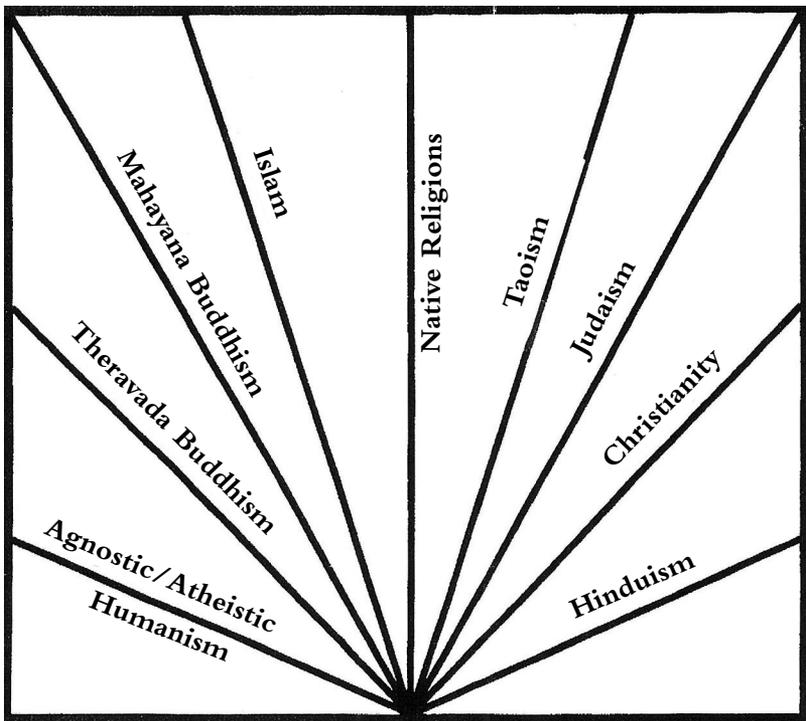
Western atheists are in the clumsy and defensive position of defining themselves with reference to what they do not believe, defined by their opponents. Small wonder that resentment suffuses their complaints. They must call themselves *unbelievers* to distance themselves from those who believe in a god and afterlife. Belief becomes a dirty word for atheists. There is an “Index of Forbidden Words” in their writing. Talk of the sacredness or sanctity of life is taboo since it is too redolent of god-talk for doctrinaire atheists. Western atheists suffer from an unnecessary limitation of language.

RELIGION AS A RESPONSE TO THE SACRED

I offer in this book a definition of religion as *a response to the sacred, whether the sacred is understood theistically or nontheistically*. “Sacred” is simply the superlative of precious, the highest encomium we have to explain our peak experiences of value. Atheists need not cover before the word. It is not threatening to nontheistic Buddhists or

Taoists nor need it be to those who call themselves secular and who are not linked to any of the so-called major religions of the world. It is just a splendid superlative that need not be freighted with supernatural or preternatural baggage. There is no reason to be phobic about it. In a very practical sense it undergirds discussion of justice, law, and politics where “the sanctity of life” is the North star whether you are a theist or not.

The following graph illustrates some, not all, of the world’s religions. Note that it includes agnostic/atheistic humanism. Secular humanists need not panic to find themselves in such company, on a graph of religion of all things! Those who reject the theistic hypothesis may have more of a sense of the sacred than do initiates of religions grown cold.



MODEL OF RELIGIONS

Civilization is the offspring of awe. Alongside the horrors of the world—and the horrors of nature—we still see the first smiles of infants, the undefeatable growth of greenery from volcanic ash, the beauty of heroic love and great minds, the sunsets, the mallards, and the rose. We see all that and we say, “Wow!” However undignified the epithet, that Wow! is the birth-zone of moral awareness and the grounding of all humane living and law. I call it *the foundational moral experience*.¹⁰ The ethical response pronounces the wonder of it all good; the religious response stretches for our highest compliment and calls it holy and sacred. This primordial awe breeds the “oughts” that blossom into laws and ensoul humane ethics, politics, and economics.

Notice, No God-Talk There. Not a Bit of It

It’s humanity-talk, morality-talk. It is deeper than god-talk since god is but a fallible inference drawn by some from the wonder of it all. On god-talk the human race never has and never will unite. Indeed it is a perennial source of division and the world’s “major religions” bear a formidable burden of proof that thus far in history they have done more good than harm. The worst of madmen, said the poet Alexander Pope, is a saint gone mad. But on the beauty of much of life and the “oughts” it inspires, we can all sit at the table, theists and nontheists alike, and share our experiences of appreciation. From such table-talk is civilization born.

THE SEPARABILITY OF DOGMAS AND MORALS

Chang Tsai (1020–1077), a major thinker in the Confucian tradition, produced what is seen as “a Confucian credo.” It begins by saying that the earth and the universe are his father and mother:

Therefore that which fill the universe I regard as my body
and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.
All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my
companions. Show deep love toward the orphaned and the

weak . . . and those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, all are my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to.¹¹

Francis of Assisi would embrace every word of that credo. So, too, would Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hannah, and Jesus. The moral vision contained therein should not fall victim to unnecessary and futile disputes over a deity's existence or nonexistence, its unicity or multiplicity. When it comes to appreciating what we are and what we have in this privileged little corner of the universe, god-talk should not divide us. What would be refreshing is a moratorium on god-talk so that together we could explore alternatives to earth's current social, political, economic, and ecological distress.