

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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ATHEISM AND IDOLATRY: THE CONTINUING CONTRADICTIONS OF MODERNITY

by Richard Horner

The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries

Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.

T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from the Rock*

If you've taken my class on contemporary culture, you know my argument: that the modern quest for truth by way of reason alone has caught us in a contradiction between the absence and lightness of being into which that quest led, on the one hand, and the presence and moral weightiness that we continue to experience in daily life, on the other. This contradiction settled in for a lot of us in the late twentieth century, and it has continued to plague us to the present day. We have not figured out how to cope with it yet. Sometimes the absence wins out, and the expressivist individual settles happily (or anxiously) into fashioning a self on the basis of ungrounded moral preferences (and we duct tape a banana to the wall and call it art). At other times, the existential reality of deep meaning and moral order wins out, and we find ourselves caring deeply about issues of justice and love, about goodness and even beauty (and then we scream at each other on Twitter all in the cause of making the world a better place). Sometimes we agonize and think carefully about the contradiction. All too often, we just stay internet connected and follow our whims and our calendars from one day to the next. Take a look around, and you will probably see evidence of both sides of this contradiction—and you will probably find signs of it in yourself as well.

I continue to be fascinated, and often deeply troubled, by the ways that I see this contradiction play out. While I remain hopeful that the depth of our moral nature and the reality of embedded meanings and inherent goods will ultimately redirect us to the God who is their source, I am often struck by how powerfully the cultural logic of modernity continues to pull us into the absence that it has created. It may be a God-haunted absence, but it is an absence, nonetheless. Put simply, it is becoming clearer with every passing day that we now

live in an atheist culture. We live in a place that gives no place to God, and yet, we seem unable not to fill this de-divinized absence with gods of our own making.

While numerous scholars have described the late-modern absence in which we live, I still find that no one has captured the reality more clearly than Friedrich Nietzsche did late in the nineteenth century when he not only declared that God was dead but also noted the consequences of his death. "Are we not plunging continually?" Nietzsche asked. "Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?" Again, he asked, "Do we not hear anything yet of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers comfort ourselves?"¹

To his credit, Nietzsche recognized that the death of God implies not only God's demise but also the loss of everything that had ever depended on him—notions such as purpose and meaning, for instance. "What alone can *our* teaching be?" Nietzsche asked.

That no one gives a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself* [...] No one is accountable for existing at all [...] He is *not* the result of a special design, a will, a purpose; he is not the subject of an attempt to attain to an 'ideal of man' or an 'ideal of happiness' or an 'ideal of morality'—it is absurd to want to *hand over* his nature to some purpose or other. We invented the concept 'purpose': in reality purpose is *lacking*.²

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In a godless universe that offers no purpose or meaning Nietzsche understood that such notions are human inventions, not rooted in some meaning-giving reality, but in our own imagination. Nietzsche understood that the end to which the story of modern reason leads is an empty space that has been cleared of meaning-giving metanarratives and capitalized words, and that it should be cleared of every surrogate that people have ever wanted to put in God's place. The death of God means the twilight of the idols as well. Therefore, knowing that all of the surrogates are as worthless as the dead God whose place they take, Nietzsche set about smashing idols and clearing the ground of the debris. His self-appointed task was "to *sound out idols*," posing questions with a hammer and listening for "that famous hollow sound which speaks of inflated bowels."³

Nietzsche was ahead of his time, but a century later, his followers continued to expose the absence into which our modern story led. Late in the twentieth century, for instance, Michel Foucault observed that, "In our day, it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man." Nietzsche "discovered the point at which man and God belong to one another," Foucault observed. He marked the point "at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first," and so, "It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance."⁴ Richard Rorty argued along similar lines, attempting to "prevent us from inventing God-surrogates like Reason, Nature," the self, the other, the proletariat, the text, the author, the reader, transgression, happiness, creativity, becoming, the body, and so on.⁵ Rorty welcomed the disenchanting, de-divinized, thoroughly naturalized understanding of the universe bequeathed to us by modernity and urged us to "believe neither in God nor in some suitable substitute."⁶ Over the past four hundred years, the cultural logic of modernity has led inexorably to an anti-theist conclusion, taking us "farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust." At its core, modern culture is, and always has been, an a-theistic culture.

At the "end of modernity," then, the question was no longer: What is the purpose of life? or: What is the meaning of human existence? Such questions had disappeared along with God. Rather, as Jacques Derrida put it late in the twentieth century, the question was: "Can we find a joyous affirmation of the play of the world... the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin?" Can we find an affirmation that "determines the noncenter otherwise

than as loss of center?" And "can we play without security?"⁷

While thoughtful people have employed various strategies for coping with the absence and for addressing Derrida's question, the strategy that has been capturing my attention recently is that of teaching ourselves to see our lives as stories in which we create meanings for ourselves. No longer able to see meaning as deeply embedded in being, we are increasingly coming to see ourselves as inventors of meanings that do not exist except in and through our stories. Indeed, narrative has become a central feature of our late-modern world. From open-mike night at the local brewery to prime-time programming on PBS, and from pop-psychology to serious philosophy we are learning to generate meanings for ourselves through the stories we tell.

The philosopher Todd May, for instance, struggling with the question of how to create meaning in a universe that gives us no meaning, tells us to think of life as having a narrative trajectory. "We can call it a narrative approach," he writes. "Since human lives unfold over time, perhaps what gives them meaning is their narrativity. Lives can be conceived as stories."⁸ Citing the psychologist Jerome Bruner, May argues "that it is through narrative that we create ourselves, [and] that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity." May continues:

Perhaps, then, if we seek to understand how our lives can be meaningful, we should look toward their narrative character. We should reflect on the stories that people tell themselves about their lives. [...] We need not worry about whether we are discovering *the* meaning of life. Our task is not one of isolating everything that might make a life meaningful. It is enough if we could find *something* that offers meaning-fulness. And for that, looking at the narrative character of human lives might provide a clue.⁹

Accepting as a given the larger webs of beliefs in which we find ourselves, May encourages us to weave our own stories and to evaluate these stories by the same narrative values that we would use to judge any good piece of fiction. In the end, he concludes, "this is simply what we do."¹⁰

Yuval Noah Harari also encourages us to see ourselves as story tellers. In his widely read books Harari argues that the ability to tell stories about things that do not exist is what has distinguished *Homo sapiens*. Our "ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature

of Sapiens language," he writes.¹¹ Indeed, "the ability of the human mind to imagine things that do not really exist," is what gave *Homo sapiens* the advantage over other species.¹² Harari argues that whether we write our stories about God or spirits, about Mother Earth or human rights, we are writing fiction. Our most important stories are about things that do not actually exist. In telling our stories we may utilize the languages of ancient religions or speak postmodernese; we may draw on family traditions, adopt the discourse and agendas of the news media, or engage in idiosyncratic inventiveness, but when it comes to questions of meaning, we are writing about things that exist only in and through our stories. Whether appealing to the Ten Commandments, the United States Constitution, our favorite voice in Congress, or our favorite poet, we are appealing to truths that exist only through the stories that we tell. Holiness, faith, happiness, justice, equality, rights, freedoms, Gods, and nations are all of our own making. This does not mean that we should abandon our stories, Harari assures us. After all, they have given us an evolutionary advantage over other species. Our fictions sustain us in important ways, so there is no need to give them up. The more aggressive anti-theists, of course, would like us at least to drop the distinctly religious fictions, but Harari and the more sanguine atheists, who listen to historians and sociologists as much as they do to natural scientists, recognize both the evolutionary survival value and social utility of the human ability to invent stories about things that do not exist.

As we all know, the stories we tell can be very inspiring, even when the author admits her story is fiction and based in illusion. When Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of *Big Magic*, invites us to embrace a life of "stubborn gladness" and to create ennobling illusions, she does so with such winsomeness that we follow her voice like children following the sound of the piper. "My ultimate choice," she writes, "is to always approach my work from a place of stubborn gladness."¹³ Gilbert loves her work and chooses to believe that her work loves her. She chooses to trust in inspiration and to believe that inspiration believes in her. "Is this delusional?" she asks. "Yes," she answers, but no more delusional than the negative delusions we so often embrace. "What I'm saying is this: If you are going to live your life based on delusions (and you are, because we all do) then why not at least select a delusion that is helpful?" Rejecting the martyr's path of "creative suffering" and advocating the way of the trickster, Gilbert argues that "Trickster energy is light, sly, transgender, transgressive, animist, seditious, primal, and endlessly shape-shifting." The trickster says, "Life

is interesting." The trickster says, "There is no system, everything is good, and nothing is sacred." Gilbert wants to give creativity back to the trickster, who trusts in himself and in the "chaotic lawless, ever-fascinating ways" of a universe in "constant play." Most importantly, "the trickster (in all his cleverness) understands the one great cosmic truth that the martyr (in all his seriousness) can never grasp: *It's all just a game. A big, freaky, wonderful game.*"¹⁴

Upon first hearing, one wonders if Gilbert has managed the trick of embracing the absence and answering Derrida's question in the affirmative. Perhaps, she has learned how to live without either God or idols, and with her help we can learn to do the same. We can accept the outcome of our modern story without so much as a trace of angst and respond to Derrida with a resounding "Yes!" Perhaps, with Gilbert's help, we can learn at last how to "believe neither in God nor in some suitable substitute." We can genuinely let go of questions about the purpose of life or the meaning of human existence and simply "find a 'joyous affirmation of the play of the world... the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin.'" We can get comfortable experiencing "the noncenter otherwise than as loss of center," and we can learn to "play without security." Perhaps, we can finally accept the thought that there are no meaning-giving metanarratives; there are only meanings that we story-tellers create through the stories we tell. Perhaps, we can get free from both God and our idols.

But then again, perhaps not.

Over the past few decades it has become apparent that it is very difficult to answer Derrida's question in the affirmative. Not even Derrida was able to manage it in the end. The simple fact is that it is hard to live without any sense of fault, truth, or origin. It is hard to live without Gods or idols. While the cultural logic of modernity led inexorably into a de-divinized absence, that absence has turned out to be a hard place in which to live without resurrecting gods of our own making. Atheism is not easy, and most of us are not up to the challenge. Most of us do want some way to make sense of the depth we encounter in life. As Richard Rorty noted, even a bunch of purported postmodern liberals want a way to see justice and beauty come together deep down in the nature of things. We want some way to identify a center that holds.

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THE POETRY OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

by Jesse Caedington

[Editor's note: Last spring one of our reading groups read the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and found the poetry so compelling, we continued through the summer. As the following essay demonstrates, Hopkins is not easy reading, so all of us in the group benefited tremendously from the insights of our group leaders and the combined wisdom of the group. One of those leaders was Jesse Caedington, who has graciously agreed to provide the following essay commending Hopkins to our readers.]

PIED BEAUTY

Glory be to God for dappled things –
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
 And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

Some poets enjoy popularity in their day. Take Robert Frost, who spoke at John F. Kennedy Jr.'s presidential inauguration. Or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose *The Courtship of Miles Standish* sold 15,000 copies on its first day of publication. Ralph Waldo Emerson made a living as a popular lecturer.

And then there is English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). He influenced luminaries such as T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and W.H. Auden, but was unread during his life by all but a few close friends (and poorly understood even by them). It is not difficult to ascertain why. His poetry is hard going for the first-time reader and remains a challenge even upon repeated readings. Here are the first four lines of Hopkins's *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name...

Even after one manages to suss out the subject of these lines (the

manner in which kingfisher birds and dragonflies catch the sunlight, the sounds of stones bouncing down wells, the plucked string of an instrument, the ring of a bell: these things are all somehow broad-casting their names, their beings), the question arises: Why so much ecstatic fuss over unspectacular subjects?

Or consider this, from *The Windhover*:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn
 Falcon, in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air...

Here Hopkins is contemplating the sight of a magnificent bird on the morning air. But again, why such exquisitely-wrought language heaped upon a relatively trivial thing? A clue here is in Hopkins's dedication to *The Windhover*: below the title, he wrote "to Christ our Lord."

To understand Hopkins, one must understand that he was from top to bottom a Christian. Such a statement reads odd on today's

eyes, when Christianity (both to skeptics and believers) is too often a mere therapy, a means by which one hopes to become happy. But to Hopkins, following Christ was no kind of therapy. Born into an established Anglican family, Hopkins converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty-two. He had recently graduated at the top of his class at Oxford University, but his conversion lost him the opportunity for a professorship there. Although his poetry already showed great promise, in order to ensure undistracted dedication to Christ he shortly thereafter burned all of his poems and joined the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits).

Thankfully, Hopkins did write at least intermittently over the remaining years of his life, though always wary of his own pride, of anything that might tempt him from devotion to Christ. Although his poems were few, he filled his journals with his observations of the spiritual and material world and formulated his groundbreaking approach to poetry.

Hopkins's view of reality tolerated no Platonic shadow of the real world. Rather, he saw "God's infinite and incredible freshness of Creation every nanosecond of every day, world without end." Hopkins latched onto a concept of "thisness," from the medieval priest and philosopher Duns Scotus. Hopkins called this idea "inscape"—meaning a particular thing's discrete qualities that make it precisely this-but-not-that. In particular, the fact of the Incarnation affirmed the deep significance of the created order. The fact that Christ took on a physical body, handled physical things, took physical food and drink, meant that the physical world was anything but trivial. It was lifted, exalted, each created thing having stamped upon it its own peculiar inscape, crafted by God.

It followed for Hopkins that words would have literal weight. "Words like bodies have both centers of gravity and centers of illumination," he wrote. And so words could capture both the weightiness of the created world and the glory of its Creator.

For all his exaltation of the physical world, Hopkins never lapsed into self-adulating self-projections. His contemporary Walt Whitman would write "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," Meanwhile, here is Hopkins, again from *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*¹

So every created thing "selves"—does its own particular thing. Doesn't this ring of Whitman's song of self? No—because this selving is not out of any thing's own glory or energy, but out of its Creator's. The poem continues, turning to contemplate people who carry out justice: "the just man justices... Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is". Meaning, the just man acts justly only because God has created him to do so.

Related to the notion of inscape, Hopkins developed the concept of "instress" to describe both the fierce movement and energy of a created thing selving, and a person's apprehension of that selving. Or another way: instress is simultaneously the expression and comprehension of each individual thing's own distinctive inscape. Finally, each thing's instress and inscape lead ultimately to Christ, for He is the source of both. Consider the instress and inscape of the world itself in *God's Grandeur*:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

The world is what it is created to be. It is charged, as in electricity, the spark that inhabits and energizes. And it is charged, as in commanded to carry out an order. The created order is given the task of showing, of carrying out, the glory of God. And this glory comes oozing out of everything because it is already there, as appropriately and assuredly as oil will ooze from olives when they are crushed. But how then can humanity not reck (reckon) God's authority, his rod of rule, of discipline, of holy greatness, when it is explicit in creation?

For Hopkins, recking the rod of God meant continually subjecting his poetic genius to God's calling on him as a Jesuit priest. In both his self-denial and the exquisite craft of his poetry, Hopkins does not fit our day. He was not some academic poet, trotting at a pace dictated by hiring committees, churning out dull, impenetrable pages to pad out resumes. Nor does his painstakingly crafted verse in praise of Christ have anything of the lazy, Green-Eggs-and-Ham interchangeability of the lyrics of so much modern evangelical worship music.

Unlike the Whitmans of his day, or the academics and the mass-market worship personalities of our own, Hopkins cultivated no image, no persona. There is nothing in his journals that gives any hint that he wrote for an imagined audience, whether highbrow or low. He wrote

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Often, therefore, without realizing what we are doing, we take leaps of faith in the direction of gods made in our own image. We create surrogates in the hope that they can stand in for the God who perished at the hands of modern reason. In short, we turn to idolatry. Sometimes our idols take a thoroughly secular form, and sometimes they retain an aura of spirituality and even religion, but don't allow the religious language to deceive you. Our "gods" are quite compatible with the atheism that frames them. Because they are gods of our own making, the "truth" about them is understood to be personal and subjective. I can have "my truth" and you can have "your truth," and our "gods" will mean whatever they mean to each of us, but they will have nothing to say to which both of us must submit. They will enable us to cope with the de-divinized space in which we find ourselves. They will comfort us and give us something to worship. While we may have accepted the death of the God that Nietzsche most wanted to see dead, we have not done so well at letting go of idols. Were Nietzsche around today, he would be disappointed. What he described as a "twilight of the idols" over a century ago has turned out not to be a twilight but a dawning, and in the morning light it has become clear that we are filling our atheist universe with idols of our own making and taking leaps of faith in their direction.

It is not easy to live without objects of faith, even if they are of our own making, and Elizabeth Gilbert's faith in "Big Magic" provides a revealing example of this truth. Gilbert is a believer, and her unabashed testimony to her faith infuses her writing with power. There are good reasons why my young friends love *Big Magic*—and reasons why I find the book inspiring too. Gilbert believes in creativity. She believes in inspiration. She believes in her work. She trusts it and loves it; she believes that it loves her as well; and with evangelistic fervor she bears witness to her faith. "I place my trust in the crazy notion that *my work loves me as much as I love it*," she writes, "and that this source of love and play is boundless." Again, she testifies, "I have chosen to believe that the desire to be creative was encoded into my DNA for reasons I will never know, and that creativity will not go away from me unless I forcibly kick it away, or poison it dead." Her "ultimate choice," therefore, is always to approach her work "from a place of stubborn gladness." She chooses to trust that "inspiration is always nearby." Inspiration "is always trying to work with me," she writes. "I trust it; it trusts me." And so, she seeks to convert her readers. "*The work wants to be made*," she assures us, "*and it wants to be made through you*." ¹⁵ Gilbert is a believer. She believes in inspiration.

She believes in creativity. She believes in her work. And she is right to do so.

In fact, she is so right, one has to wonder. Perhaps Gilbert is putting us in touch with something more than just a helpful illusion. Perhaps her writing is inspiring because she is onto something that our late-modern culture has a hard time making sense of. The deep yearning to create may be more than just an evolutionary advantage for the survival of the species. Though Gilbert sees her work as rooted in illusion, she puts us in touch with realities that run deep indeed. One has to wonder, therefore, if the reason her writing finds the resonance it does in the hearts of thirty-year-olds (and their parents) is that it is rooted not in illusion but in reality. Gilbert admits that she does not know where the urge to create comes from, but we are not crazy to think that it comes from the God who is a Creator himself and in whose image we are both created and creative. When we create, then, we are not simply feeding on illusion, we are embracing a central aspect of who we are meant to be and experiencing a corresponding joy that must never be stifled by doubt or fear. We are right, therefore, to identify with Gilbert in her attitude of "stubborn gladness" and to offer a hearty "Amen!" when she calls us to believe in inspiration, in creativity, and in the work itself.

David Foster Wallace was right. "Everybody worships." We have choices in determining what we will worship, but, "There is no such thing as not worshipping." I'm not sure I know anyone who doesn't worship something, and so, once again, we have to wonder. Must we worship only illusions? Bow only to idols of our own making? Harari is right in observing that we do make up stories about things that do not exist. We do this a lot. But that may not be all there is to it. There may be something behind the illusions, something we all seek even as we create the illusions and idols we do. We are made for worship, and as both Blaise Pascal and G. K. Chesterton have noted, when we try not to worship God, we end up worshipping anything and everything. Even in a culture that leads us "farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust" we cannot help ourselves. We have good reason, then, to think there may actually be a real and true object of worship—a God who is no illusion, a God in whose being and character our own being and character are rooted. We long to worship, and we do so because we were created to be worshipers by the One who is both the source and the object of that longing.

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simply wrote as he was created to do, for an audience of one—not himself, but his Creator.

Theological wranglings can too often flatten out the divine into little more than a complicated algebra problem. Hopkins's work breathes life into contemplation of the things of God. He reminds us that the mystery of God is "an incomprehensible certainty." God is complex beyond comprehension, yet not beyond expression. He is actually, concretely (if only partially) discernible in the created world.

Ours is a day that is grossly caught up in performing for a fleeting (and often imaginary) audience, and yet simultaneously has a deformed inward focus, oblivious to any reality other than the individual's own subjective experience. By contrast, Hopkins's poetry can carry the reader to an objective sureness of self not dependent on a fickle public, because "the only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ". At the same time, his work turns the reader away from self to glory in the diamond-hard reality of a creation exterior to the beholder, where "[t]here lives the dearest freshness deep down things." Throughout the short forty-four years of his life, Hopkins's own instress—the expression of his unique calling—forced him in two conflicting directions: the development of his poetic vision, and obedience to his Jesuit calling. The Jesuits moved him continually around England and finally to Dublin, exhausting him in varied teaching and ministry positions. He labored on according to his particular God-stamped inscape—the manner in which he was distinctly created—crafting his poetics in the rare, spare moments afforded by the rigor of his priestly duties. For all his efforts, Hopkins would not be published until 1918. Yet twenty-nine years earlier, on his final day on this earth, the fatally ill Hopkins was heard to repeat, "I am so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life."

Pax Christi, Father Hopkins.

Hopkins: Resources

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Hopkins: Notes

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Atheism and Idolatry: Notes

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