

The Proceedings of:

“Gott ist tot”

A Discussion on Modernity and the Sacred

On Monday, October 17th 2011, a group of students from Claremont Graduate University and Claremont Lincoln University sat down to discuss what Friedrich Nietzsche’s phrase “Gott ist tot” (God is dead) meant for our different philosophical perspectives. The panel had six people on it with different backgrounds, worldviews, and responses to the “death-of-God.” The panel was co-sponsored by The Society for Philosophy and Religion at Claremont (SPARC) and the Claremont Journal of Religion (of which the proceedings will be published in its Inaugural Issue set for January 2012, www.claremontjournal.com). What occurred was a stimulating discussion about what “Gott ist tot” means for atheists, Catholics, Evangelicals, and other faith traditions.

Of the six panelists, one self-identified as an atheist, another as a liberal Catholic, one as a secular scholar of the Hebrew Bible, and another as an Evangelical Christian (the other two did not choose to deliberately self-identify and many of us discussed the heteronymous nature of the labels we utilize and associate ourselves with). The six perspectives can be summarized as follows:

- (Atheist): If death-of-God theology was to truly believe in Nietzsche’s phrase, and Nietzsche’s philosophy, it should abandon Christian symbols and just become atheistic. Religious naturalism does a better job than

death-of-God theology in bridging the gap between the sacred and the profane.

- (Liberal Catholic): The death-of-God shows that contemporary society no longer needs God to explain the physical world we inhabit, since science has already done this sufficiently. This, however, does not mean that God does not exist, since an Analogy of Being (*analogia entis*) can still be made.
- (Evangelical Christian): The death-of-God does fill a positive roll in helping Western culture distinguish between “nominal” and “genuine” forms of Christian faith. God dying on the cross (Jesus) promotes altruism and ethical behavior in a world where people have the “will to power.”
- (Unidentified): The "death of God" is now on the shoulders of liberal protestant theology, global communication, and a general "castration" of the divine. People of immanence are now responsible for themselves and not a deceased distant deity.
- (Secular scholar of the Hebrew Bible): The death-of-God is about the death of a *certain* God, namely, Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. There are three good reasons to assume the death of this God: biblical criticism, archeological data, and the Holocaust.
- (Unidentified): Following Nietzsche, a tough-minded spirituality that forgoes transcendence, and remains faithful to the earth in all of its ambivalence, will be able to provide a source of life-affirming values long after theism has ceased to be credible.

Many interesting questions were raised by members of the audience, two of which I found very telling: (1) “How does the death-of-God influence the way atheists, Christian fundamentalists, and certain marginal religious groups are viewed by society?” and (2) “Why are religious persons hesitant to admit the faults of themselves and their respective institutions?” Although the discussion went very well, I think that having other perspectives involved would have enriched the conversation. Even though the panel was lacking in certain areas, it nonetheless provoked interesting questions and responses from the presenters and audience members alike.

Nathan W. Greeley, President of SPARC

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The Gospel of Christian Atheism (1966), and other works like it, have had a profound impact upon theological studies, to the point that if one were to describe the theologies which arose in the 20th century one would inevitably have to mention the “death of God” theologians (the author Thomas J.J. Altizer; and William Hamilton, and Paul Van Buren). It was not only the *Time Magazine* article of 1965 which made “death of God” theology popular, nor the connections they make with Friedrich Nietzsche, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich, but the *radically new way of understanding Christianity and Christian faith* that made such a venture fashionable. Now in 2010 “death of God” theology has lost much of its initial steam and has lead the way for many contemporary understandings of faith that do not see God’s death as the *sine qua non* for doing theology: Religious naturalism could be said to have bridged the divide between a profane world and the sacred without ever needing a God to die; post-metaphysical theology retains some of the emphasis on the Word or *logos* but with a greater emphasis on the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida; Process theology has the same emphasis on immanence and the kenosis of the Word; and constructive theology has accepted the rejection of “the increasingly archaic ecclesiastical tradition”¹ and understands that theology exists in and how *we fashion it*. Each of these contemporary forms of theology could be said to have already accepted much of the critiques of “death of God” theology (even unconsciously).

¹ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 9

For Altizer, what he calls the “atheistic prophets”, (Blake, Hegel, Marx, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche) issued critiques upon a Christianity that “they knew to be opposed to the advent of the new man”.² They were “obsessed with Christianity” but found its theological formulas and ecclesiastical hierarchy appalling. Stripped of these chimeras Altizer thinks these prophets may have actually enjoyed the kernel of truth hidden underneath Christianity’s medievalism. Like Voltaire, they were not necessarily opposed to Christianity and Christian ideals, but to their historical and material manifestations. Just how compatible Nietzsche (or others like him) is with any form of Christianity is still up to debate, but Altizer sides with those who think they can be mutually complimentary.

For atheists who follow along the Nietzschean path, Altizer is committing a horrible fallacy. Saying Nietzsche may possibly be interpreted as a “radical Christian”³ does grave injustice to his writings, ideas, and perspectives on religious belief. Whatever form of Christianity that thinks it is compatible with Nietzsche (i.e. radical theology) must *completely trans-valuate* their theology. Radical theology does not take the death of God as serious as Nietzsche, for even when it admits to God’s death, it still retains a hyper-deity in its notion of the Christian *logos*. If you really wanted to be a radical theologian, you should just be an atheist, plain and simple. There are good reasons why Nietzsche is considered an atheist and why those who have utilized his ideas argue for strict atheism (Walter Kaufman): it is because that is the most obvious and critical interpretation of his philosophy. To use Nietzsche as an arch-type of a “radical Christian” is like using Heidegger as a

² Ibid, 20

³ Ibid, 25

lens for doing onto-theology (Paul Tillich); the authors would be turning in their graves.

Altizer's project is an interesting one, and has been influential in liberal theological studies, but it has failed to reach the conservative Christian or the atheist. Of course we cannot expect something so impressive, but the barrier Altizer wished to break is still standing before us. Atheists and agnostics alike will inevitably find the "death of God" problematic, because it has a "God" who died. The atheist may say "well, at least he read Blake and Nietzsche" but "still I cannot mess around in petty, esoteric battles over what the logos is". Likewise, conservative religious persons will find the same problems. The foggy language, mystical emphasis, and the mixture with secular philosophy, does not bode well with the orthodox. The people who would find this project unproblematic are some liberal religious persons, mystically minded believers who enjoy Pseudo Dionysus, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa, and possibly readers looking for existential and novel forms of doing theology.

In recent years what has come to be known as "religious naturalism" (Gordon Kaufman, Stuart Kaufmann, and Ursula Goodenough) seeks to show how meaning and purpose, a sense of wonder and awe, and morality are an integral part of the natural world we inhabit. This "natural" understanding of religion offers reasons why the mystery of the cosmos is greater than the answer (i.e. God) assumed in traditional religion. To experience the world as mysterious is to abandon the idea that one needs a "comprehensive and total explanation" for life and existence. It is agnostic when it comes to supposed "ultimate" answers, and it should stay this way.

There is simply no way to confirm any claim of God's revelation (in history, scripture, tradition, or experience); there are also good reasons to doubt any claims that act as if there is some indubitable foundation, Archimedean point, or *sub specie aeterni*, which to base your worldview on. Our finite human "situatedness" guarantees that our ideas remain expressions of subjective beings embedded in their natural environment.

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I take Nietzsche's observation regarding the death of God in *The Gay Science* (1882) to be pragmatic in character: for all intents and purposes, God is no longer a necessary postulate needed to account for the reality in which we live. With the deconstruction of the infallible nature of Scripture by the application of the historical critical method and recognition of the deterministic nature of the physical world system through scientific analysis, the attempt to base knowledge on God's edict is rendered impossible. Put simply, with the advance of human knowledge and social progress by Nietzsche's time, God has become obsolete. I am a theist, I am a Christian, and I agree with Nietzsche. I do not wish here to provide an analysis and critique of Nietzsche's observation, but to instead embrace Nietzsche's point and consider how theism can survive in the wake of this "death of God."

In our current age of scientific progress it is much more difficult to be a theist than an atheist. It appears that all things in the world are not only physically caused, leaving no room for divine intervention and providence, but also that the mechanisms of causality are further reducible to lower states of physical relation. Thus, the traditional theistic model of God's relationship with the world appears untenable in our current age. Truths of faith, however, must not be jettisoned because they represent a fundamental understanding of reality based on experiential intuition. What is needed for theism, then, is a shift in understanding how theology is to go about doing its business of discerning and reflecting on God's relationship with the natural system and the role of human nature therein.

Just as infants and young children have their whole world defined by their parents, religious epistemology is a mode of knowledge entirely defined by relation to God: our ancestors created systems of social order relative to their place in space and time based on an intuitional experience of a world that finds its source for existence in God. The significant knowledge gleaned from this intuitive experience, often pertaining to rules for social conduct and worship, was written down as sacred because such intuitional truths were considered to be fundamentally descriptive of a reality established by God. This epistemological mode continued throughout western history and we can see the zenith of religious epistemology at the eve of the Reformation, when the Holy See not only controlled the economy, culture, and political influence of Europe, but its font of knowledge as well. With the dawn of the Reformation human thought began to free itself from the confines of dogmatic deduction for it was recognized that the content of human knowledge was not restricted to the authority of the Catholic Church. This epistemic shift laid the groundwork for knowledge based not on deduction from pre-established metaphysical principles, but based instead on induction from sense experience.

With the rise of the scientific method in the sixteenth century, humanity had discovered the most important epistemological tool since the birth of language. What's more significant is that this method, based on observation, hypothesis, and experiment is not only self-authenticating, but it is also democratic because its conclusions can be verified by any person in any culture across the stars. Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, Huygens, and Newton: these are the fathers of science's "Patristic era," and through their efforts a world was discovered that was self-

developing according to the causal structures of physical mechanism. Questions regarding how God fit into this deterministic scheme rightly arose. For example, when pressed by Napoleon as to how God fit into his deterministic view of nature, Pierre-Simon LaPlace replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis."¹ Thus with our scientific understanding God need no longer be employed to account for the efficient causes taking place in the world. Nietzsche's age, and our current age as well, is the direct descendent of this paradigm shift in human epistemology. As such, we have come to realize that we do not need this thing called "God" to account for the reality in which we live. Epistemologically speaking, therefore, we have become fully independent from God.

But notice something that is contained in this quote by LaPlace. When he says of God "I have no need of that hypothesis," the true nature of the scientific pursuit is revealed: it is a method, not a metaphysic. Far from establishing grounds for moral behavior and providing doctrine on how to live life, the scientific method is intrinsically descriptive in character. The scientific method analyses, forms hypotheses, and tests these hypotheses in order to form theories that are descriptive of the physical universe in which we live. More importantly, the method rejects a teleology of final causes in nature and so remains forever silent on purpose. If anything, science tells us there is no such thing as purpose in nature for all is merely physical relation. Scientific analysis may tell us how our morals arose from natural selection and neurological representation, but the method cannot identify an

¹ Graham Upton and Ian Cook, "Laplace, Marquis Pierre-Simon." *A Dictionary of Statistics*. Oxford University Press (2008), accessed 17, October 2011:
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t106.e886>>

objective morality independent of the physicality of the human subject.² But the whole point of a religious epistemology is to grasp at a fundamental truth present through the basic intuition of experience and know it to be descriptive of reality regardless of human subjectivity. For example, in Genesis 1:31 we know that before humanity came along, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (RSV). Thus creation is intrinsically sacred in the theistic world-view apart from human identity. Who today, with the threat of global ecological collapse, would disagree with this intuition? I draw on this not to evangelize but to merely highlight an example where a truth of faith is descriptive of reality prior to scientific analysis. Sure, we should apply science to how this understanding arose and determine how it functions in human identity and social structures, etc., but the fundamental reality of the sanctity of the world is intuitively present in subjective experience before testing of the hypothesis takes place.

There is, therefore, an intrinsic Truth to reality that science and theology are trying to determine, the former pertaining to the domain of physical truth, the latter

² In *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 2010 [eBook]) Sam Harris attempts to root morality in a scientific understanding of human nature based on the thesis that “meaning, values, morality, and the good life must relate to facts about the well-being of conscious creatures—and, in our case, must lawfully depend upon events in the world and upon states of the human brain” (23). Although I agree that the subjective understanding of morality arises from neurological representation as derived from natural selection, I find Harris’ effort to establish objective morality in the physicality of *Homo Sapiens* limited in scope for two reasons. First, by limiting the definition of what is moral to what constitutes “the well-being of conscious creatures” Harris loses sight of the objective nature of morality, which religion is trying to articulate albeit often detrimentally, and so cuts out the non-sentient universe from partaking in the intrinsic Good that is existence. Second, if the objective nature of values is evolutionarily and neurophysiologically dependent, then it is likely that a different intelligent species would form their understanding of the well being of conscious creatures according to their neurophysiological patterns of representation pertaining to the sense data of their world. Thus, one could account for an objective morality for humans, and an objective morality for species X, but both of these moral systems would be valid representations of values indicative of the well-being of conscious creatures, “translate[d] into facts that can be scientifically understood,” (17) as they are neurologically constructed in each species. Both humanity’s and species X would have an “objective morality” as understood by scientific analysis. Therefore, we are once again back into moral relativism, something Harris denies (50-51).

pertaining to ontological truth.³ The question then becomes whether or not it is possible for these two domains to intersect and if physical truth can be descriptive of ontological truth. For the theist, the former is contained in the latter and so I hold that theological truths cannot contradict physical truths for theology and science are distinct epistemological modes for investigating the common foundation of reality. But likewise, physical truth necessarily reflects a degree of ontological truth for physical truth is born out of the same foundation—being itself.

Just as the scientific world-view holds that the universe is intelligible through studying its physical relations, so too does theism hold that God is intelligible through the analogy of being. From the subjective experience of what it is like to be, the never-ending journey of discerning Truth in reality begins, and this journey carries with it all sorts of baggage pertaining to physical existence. If religion served the epistemological function in humanity's childhood, then the rejection of God in favor of a socio-scientific epistemology can be seen as indicative of humanity's teenage years, where the authority of one's parents is rejected in favor of one's own identity as determined by one's environment. Like teenagers, we have become bitter and angry with our God for throwing us into this world of suffering and abuse. We see how God has been understood throughout human history and how such understandings have led to the antitheses of the truths they claim to hold. By

³ Here I am articulating an epistemological relationship between science and theology similar to that of Karl Rahner. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 22: 2-3* ([Limerick]: Centre for Culture, Technology and Values: 2005). According to Rahner, "Natural science investigates in a posteriori experience individual phenomena which human beings (ultimately through the experience of their senses) encounter in their world, and the relationship of these phenomena to one another. Theology has to do with the totality of reality as such, and with the ground of this reality, and its method is ultimately one of a priori questioning. Consequently, there need be no fear of a conflict of competence between natural science and theology, provided that, when such unintentional violations do occur, they inform one another of them."

Nietzsche's time we had no choice but to reject God, the common theory responsible for these absurdities. But notice, we may have the light of induction leading us through the tunnels of existence, but we are left with insurmountable questions pertaining to purpose and meaning that the scientific method is not set up to answer.⁴ We forever wander the labyrinth that is the search for purpose and meaning in a life where only death is certain. So, are we to reject the methodology of science in terms of learning about how morality and social systems are constructed? Absolutely not! The theist can no longer afford to avoid or reject the conclusions reached by the sciences and their application to society, morals, and human communities. More importantly, the methodology must be embraced by theology as revelatory of the Truth present in reality alongside the revelations of Scripture, tradition, and living faith.

Thus we are today on the eve of a new paradigm shift. Turning back to the (admittedly idealized and overly simplified) metaphor of human development, Nietzsche's observation marks the high point of the teenage life: the fundamental rejection of our parents as necessary for our lives. Where we were once children, clinging to the imperatives of religious doctrine, we have thrown religion aside in

⁴ The scientific method is a method derived from the observable universe (i.e. through the development of human cognition according to natural selection) that tests predictions and ideas made about the observable universe. As such, the method, being derived from and about the physical universe, cannot apply itself to the question of God for God is not contained within the observable universe but is instead the constituting factor of the physical universe. This is important to recognize for two reasons. First, it admits that the question of God's existence is beyond the scope of science, and second, it shows that the descriptive and objective data gleaned by the method resists, by definition as a *method*, proscriptive dogmatism about humanity's place in the world. Although one can make the argument that a question that goes beyond the scope of scientific analysis is an invalid question, humanity is an intrinsically curious species and the mere fact that we are able to posit a question that goes beyond the limits of the best epistemological tool we have shows that we intuit the fundamental nature of the reality to transcend space-time. As I understand, it is in this fundamental intuition that theology begins.

our effort to define ourselves for ourselves in our own reality apart from any relation to God. Considering the moral atrocities of our previous century we are, pragmatically speaking, no better off with God dead than with God living. The only difference is that I can no longer base my faulty morality on a misunderstanding of Biblical interpretation. I must instead base it on psychological behavior, neurological brain states, and in the end whether or not a quantum string vibrates this way or that.

The past has come and gone, and even should the theist wish to return to the religion of humanity's youth, we cannot. To draw on St. Paul, when we were children, we thought like children and when we were teenagers, we thought like teenagers. Now it is time for us to continue our pattern of growth as a species and recognize that we are now adults wherein the value of the subjective experience of being in the world and the objective data of science are mutually correlative and significant for discerning fundamental Truth in reality. The knowledge gleaned by the application of the scientific method, therefore, is not a threat to theism, but is instead a mode of human epistemology that needs—no, *must*—be employed alongside the modes of revelation and tradition in order to properly discern the nature of the universe, human identity, and creation's relationship to its creator. As theists we can no longer live in the childhood psyche that is ancient religion with its cultural exclusivity born out of a static paradigm of human nature. As atheists one must recognize the limited scope of the scientific method and see religion, even with all its problems and failings, as a function of the intrinsic quest for meaning that lies

in the heart of every human seeking to transcend the existential limitations of time and space.

As adults who have grown past the self-centeredness of our teenage years we realize that our parents have wanted all along for us to grow up so that they could release us into the world and see us flourish as productive members of the world they brought us into. They revel in our joys, applaud our success, continue to critique our dumb mistakes, and they give us shoulders to cry on when things go wrong — but they don't make our decisions for us. We have to make our life our own, but they ask only that we continue to love them. So it is with God: we may not need God to account for the reality in which we live, but the relationship nevertheless remains. If the death of God has brought about the noontide in human understanding,⁵ today is the evening meal when we return from our studies to the table of our home, where we sit with our parents who gave us life and share with them in active communion what we have learned about ourselves, and the world in which we live.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Norwood, Mass: Norwood Press, 1896), 401-405

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I think that many evangelicals are genuinely bewildered by the statement that “God is Dead.” I am sure many readers have seen the t-shirts, bumper stickers, or Facebook posts that say “God is dead – Nietzsche; Nietzsche is Dead – God.” These things clearly show a lack of understanding about what Nietzsche meant by the death of God. Yet, not all evangelicals lack understanding on the matter. My undergraduate mentor at Vanguard University was the first person to accurately explain to me what Nietzsche meant and clue me in on the fact that Nietzsche is making a relevant comment on our times rather than a self contradictory statement about God. One has to read the statement in context to see the cultural and philosophical statement about the credibility of God in philosophy and culture. The simple fact of the matter is that fewer and fewer Westerners believe in God. God and religion are being seen more and more as culturally irrelevant. Worldwide Christianity as a percentage of global population has dropped by roughly 1.5% during the 20th century. Evangelicals are not ignorant nor ignoring these facts. In response to the death of God, this essay will point a positive side of this cultural event and an evangelical prescription for increasing the credibility of the Christian God.

A way to interpret the event of the cultural death of God is that this is actually good news, both for Christianity and for belief in God. Such a break might free Christianity from the shackles of Western culture by making Westerners no longer automatically Christian by virtue of cultural conditioning. The current situation

could be not so much a falling away from Christianity but a freeing of those who would previously have been merely nominal Christians. Such individuals now have greater liberty to be non-theists or non-Christians of various varieties. With this secularization, there is a greater freedom to be public about reservations, doubts, and outright anger at Christianity. What was previously below the surface, subsumed within cultural Christianity, is now exposed in the light. The socio-cultural motive to adhere to Christianity is not as strong as it once was (although this motive seems to unwavering in some places). Westerners now have more freedom to authentically live and be open about their negative religious thoughts and choices without as much fear of socio-cultural consequences.

This is good for evangelical Christians because genuine dialogue with other views is only possible if those other views have the freedom to speak. Such dialogue is bound to enrich Christian thought and it also furthers the evangelistic imperative within evangelicalism. Without genuinely free dialogue there is neither the possibility of changing one's own views or the hope of changing the views of others. The freedom to disagree also means the freedom to agree. There is more hope to convince others to join a position if there is freedom to disagree. Otherwise what happens is merely a parroting of ideas that one needs to publically espouse for the sake of cultural survival and prosperity. The end of the link between Christianity and Western culture is therefore good news since it opens up a new field for evangelism in the West.

It is also not surprising to evangelicals that a traditional Christian God is no longer so credible among non-evangelical scholars. For modernity, and for many

postmodernities, human reason is the measure of everything, including God. Yet the primary message of evangelicalism, indeed the message of the majority of classical Christianity, is the death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross for the sake of renewing, reestablishing, and revitalizing the relationship between God and human beings. This is the most relevant formulation of the death of God for evangelicals, that of the death of God on the cross. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23 “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (NIV). The death of God on the cross transcends human reason. It is not against reason but it cannot be encompassed within the sphere of reason. For those who must encompass all things within the realm of human reason the message of the death of God on the cross seems like pure foolishness. Thus it should not be at all surprising that those who view human wisdom as supreme would not find this Christian message or the God depicted in the message particularly credible.

The evangelical prescription for increasing the credibility of Christianity is for Christians to live transformed lives. It is in transformed lives in which Christians love unconditionally in a way that is not commonly seen in the world that Christianity becomes most credible and culturally relevant. In a world marred by the will to power, the will to subjugate others beneath the individual will, selfless living is rare. This transformation comes by way of the death of God on the Cross. It is the death of God that enables death of self with its consequent selflessness. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 2:20 that, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son

of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Elsewhere Paul struggles with ongoing sin and temptation so this is not a simple pat answer. Yet something happens when we submit our wills to death with Christ. The freedom to make choices outside of the will to power opens up when the self dies and we live with Christ’s will instead. It is inherently transforming when our wills die with God on the cross and we also die to ourselves to be resurrected with Christ and live for God.

In conclusion, evangelicals are well aware of the secularization of the Western world and are not surprised. Secularization is an opportunity for renewal and for living out in a credible fashion the incredible message of the death of God on the cross.

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On whose lips does Nietzsche place the phrase, “God is dead?” He places it on the lips of the madman – the one who represents the lack of order, chaos, and threat to the institutions and legitimizing factors of society.¹ What happened to God? Those very institutions and legitimizing factors—the foundations of society have murdered him. No rituals will revive or replace the Madman’s dead God—although it is somewhat ironic that Nietzsche met his demise haunted by the specter of madness.

But what does this mean? What does it mean that “God is dead” for society today? Does it mean that no one acknowledges God or worships a deity? Does it mean that scientific advancement has placed God so far away from the Earth and humanity that the notion of a capital “G” deity is absurd? I think that it is not any of these—especially the former statement, although the latter has some merit. It is more of a factor of force and power that the concept of God has on society—a toothless deity, a God without bite, an all-loving God that is so comfortable to embrace because this God implies no responsibility—divine or human. This is what happened to God—He was the victim of “anti-natural castration” from a deity who conquers and takes revenge (I am a jealous God!) into the “God of Love and Forgiveness”—the opposite of a physiologically robust, all-powerful, transcendent

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman, (New York: Random House, 1974), 181

deity into a weak and dying (now dead) deity of no immediate responsibility and no “will-to-power.”²

How are the symptoms of this manifested in the society of today? It is manifested primarily in the liberal wing of Protestant Christianity. The heterodox of today are ministers and academics like Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, and others who stretch the definition of Christianity to include everyone at the expense of the physiology of God to the point of death. If one looks at Bell’s newest book, *Love Wins*, one can read him as reworking the understanding of the Christian afterlife. He reworks the typical negative, punishing afterlife and positive, rewarding afterlife into a treatise on understanding heaven as a place where one will not be comfortable if one is vengeful, violent, angry, scornful, etc and that reality will be “hellish” for those who possess those characteristics.³

Spong and Borg are sanitizers of the theological traditions of Christianity who attempt to salvage what is left of Christianity after the barrages of reason and science has stripped it down over the last 300 years. They are some of the ones parading the “puppet” of God in front of a fire to cast the shadow of a dead deity on the walls of our limited caves, just as Nietzsche predicted in the *Gay Science*.⁴ In fact, it is these liberal protestant theologians that Nietzsche calls for the harshest condemnation of in the *Anti-Christ*, stating “One should be harsher with...liberal

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Judith Norman and Aaron Ridley, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14

³ Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 48-52

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 167

Protestants than orthodox ones. The criminality of being Christian increases with your proximity to science.”⁵

By extension, Nietzsche would heap harsher condemnation on Christians who are closer to reason and science than others who keep their distance. Since science has informed the modern worldview and Christianity—including the concept(s) of the divine found within—is largely based on an ancient worldview that has been disconfirmed, society is dealing with a dead deity and a house of cards that supports the corpse. We are a globally connected humanity and the insights gained by this communication largely allow one to see the differences and similarities between cultures and religions—that all humans participate in some form of meaning-making. This understanding has pervaded the ethos of modernity and at best, “God is dead” in the sense that the responsibility lies with humanity and not the divine—we, those of immanence, are responsible and not a deceased distant deity.

⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 67

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In his 1882 work *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the death of the Christian God in the epistemological sense. However, certain historical developments beginning in the twentieth century have made belief in the deity of the Judaic religious tradition exceptionally problematic. With the rise of modern Hebrew Bible scholarship, in particular the evidence provided by archaeology in the Ancient Near East, the claims for the existence of a transcendent deity who established a covenant of loyalty with the Israelite people during the temporally contextualized Exodus have come under scrutiny as much as the historicity of the biblical Exodus narrative itself. However, no singular event has dealt a blow to belief in the Jewish God as much as the Holocaust. In this essay, I will briefly examine the ways in which these two historical developments – archaeological criticism of the Hebrew Bible and the Nazi atrocities – have made it difficult for me to believe in God.

Much of the basis for modern Jews' belief in the Israelite deity remains the belief in the historical veracity of the Exodus myth.¹ Even for Jews who do not believe in the traditional vision of the Israelite deity, the annual Passover celebration commemorates an actual historical event. However, what does it mean for believers if the Exodus is a myth? In *The Bible Unearthed*, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman argue that the lack of a demonstrable in evidence for hunter-gathers and

¹ I define "myth" not as an untrue story, but rather as a narrative dealing with a supernatural being or beings that serves as a source of ontological and/or psychological meaning and values for the community of believers.

pastoral nomads in the Sinai Peninsula during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages suggests, “that the Exodus did not happen at the time and in the manner described in the Bible.”² If the covenantal ceremony described in Exodus 19, the foundational event for Jewish religion that establishes relationship between God and his people, did not in fact occur, we must recognize the existence of such a deity as an actor in history as an unsupportable historical hypothesis.

In *After Auschwitz*, Richard L. Rubenstein suggested, “the single greatest challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps.”³ I think he is correct in this sense; Jewish readers must reevaluate the biblical tradition and its image of deity. Rubenstein argues that the Holocaust signals “the death of God... the demise of the God who was the ultimate actor in history.”⁴ Many, including the more traditionally theologically minded, may see this as the ultimate blasphemy. However, we should not dismiss Rubenstein’s observation out of hand. If any event in recent history has been truly iconoclastic, shattering our presumptions concerning the Jewish vision of the divine, it was the Holocaust. This period of great horror may or may not have been the final nail in the coffin for theism – that is a matter of personal reflection and choice – but it certainly represents the death of a specific mythic *image* of God.

I argue that the aforementioned image of God is a broken myth as characterized by Neal Gillman in *Sacred Fragments*; “one that is recognized as a

² Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), 63

³ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 153

⁴ *Ibid*, 154

symbol and not as a literal description of God.”⁵ If historical criticism and the Holocaust have destabilized belief in this God, perhaps it is for the best because this conception of the divine is out-dated and out of place in the modern world. Instead of mourning the death of a deity who never existed in the first place, the death of God can symbolize recognition of the incompatibility between belief and historical reality will force us to reevaluate our mythology and our theology. If we want to be intellectually honest, we must recognize the God of the Hebrew Bible as a broken myth and, if deciding to remain theologically minded, begin the process creating new myths that better suit our contemporary existential demands.

⁵ Neal Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 83

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I write this short essay as someone who is of the opinion that they possess a rather keen religious consciousness. Religion is important to me, it always has been, and it always will be. I see everything, we might say, from a religious point of view.¹ However, I also write as someone whose favorite thinkers are often uniformly classified as irreligious, if not outright enemies of religion, for one reason or another. I almost without exception find myself in agreement with the very positions for which they are so characterized. Why then describe myself as a religious person? Ultimately, for me, the reason is a matter of affectivity: I live in awe of, and revere, the productive totality that conditions and makes possible my existence, which is the source and ground of all that I value, and that I view myself as an expression of. This is all, the beginning, and in most respects more or less the end, of my religiosity. Yet I don't feel that its simplicity and bareness, its Spartan accoutrements, which might be otherwise characterized as its lack of promises, consolations, liturgies, institutions, myths and morality tales, should lead one to see my religiosity as impoverished.

And that brings me to the crux of the issue that we are here tonight to address, the problematic relationship that I will characterize as being between the values of the Enlightenment and the sacred. My view of the matter, to speak tersely, is that there in actuality is no "religious" problem that lies between these values and the sacred--there are simply problems that often lie between those values and

¹ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, ed. Peter Winch (London: Routledge, 1993) 1

specific traditions or formulations of faith, including historical problems, philosophical problems, textual-linguistic problems, scientific problems, and socio-cultural problems. But the idea that all religious perspectives are under threat or have been dissolved by the values of the Enlightenment would certainly be a ham-fisted one.

I am not an enemy of the Enlightenment, nor an enemy of the hyper-Enlightenment that many people refer to as postmodernism. I believe that a critical and skeptical stance towards received opinion is a requisite ingredient for the emancipatory honesty that has served as the bedrock upon which every great cultural achievement of the past five hundred years has been based. I do not deny that its companion ideology, utilitarianism, has brought its own nightmares and calamities. These would include a global capitalist system that has proven beneficent only for the powerful, and an inseparable all-pervasive technological instrumentalism that admits of no cost being too high if it turns a profit.

I wish to argue though that the loss of the sacred need not be added to the charges leveled at the adoption of the values of the Enlightenment. Although the discrediting of Christianity may seem to have left a gaping hole in the soul of the West, due to that religion's limited ability to adapt to its new context, we need not see this development as having placed us in a hopeless situation. Other religious outlooks could, and they still can, take Christianity's place. This is because sacrality, as a bare concept, considered as the establishment of highest values, is not affected by scientific discoveries, historical findings, theories of language, or cultural revolutions. In the abstract, it is impervious. It is only the concretization of this

concept by filling it with a particular historical-cultural content, claims, and assertions that creates the possibility of tensions, antiquations, and inequalities in explicative power. And so my position on the matter of the death of God is one of unqualified acceptance--frankly, the issue is no longer of great interest in my opinion. What is of interest, and remains of interest, is what to do about the fact that we still feel awe, gratitude, and joy in the face of existence, and that we still wish to express those feelings by means of artistic, cosmological, and metaphysical pictures. The sacred or the divine are not incompatible with the values of the Enlightenment, although certain understandings of these notions inarguably appear to be. The earth can become re-enchanted, the only necessary condition being that we remain faithful to it.²

Since the Enlightenment and its offspring the hyper-Enlightenment will shape the foreseeable future of humankind, there would seem to be little point in wishing that things were otherwise or of hoping for some sort of revival of pre-Enlightenment perspectives. The religious traditions that have fared poorly in their engagement with the values of the Enlightenment will no doubt continue to do so. But that has little to do with the sacred, as considered in its bare potentiality. God is dead, but do we need gods to have religion? Conversely, do we need religions to have God? My answer to both questions, and from my point of view they are in fact the same question, is negative. The fact that dogmatic theism is no longer the majority stockholder in the Western consciousness is neither a cause for concern nor regret.

² See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 6