

## *The god (and gods) of This World*

Rev. Joe Connolly

“...unbelieving minds have been kept from seeing by the god of this world, the god of the present age, so that they do not see the light, the splendor of the Gospel showing forth from the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” — 2 Corinthians 4:4.

I have mentioned a number of times that for his entire working career my father taught at Saint Regis High School, on East 84<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. Across the street from Regis sat Saint Ignatius Grade School. As is implied by the names Saint Regis and Saint Ignatius, both Saints who were Jesuits, these are Jesuit institutions (although the Grade School was and is actually run by the Sisters of Charity. And by the way, the Sisters of Charity were founded in New York City.)

I attended that grade school— Saint Ignatius— for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. So, it was not just my upbringing in a Catholic family that influenced my early years. Many days after classes I would walk across the street to Regis High School, sit in an empty classroom and do homework or read.

As a consequence, I often interacted with my Father’s Jesuit colleagues. Or, as I have sometimes insisted, in many ways my best friends in these very formative years happened to be Jesuits. In a real sense I had Jesuit training, more so than just being in a school.

Now what I am about to say I have mentioned here before. When I graduated from Saint Ignatius grade school in 19xx (here the pastor places his hand on his mouth and mumbles) they gave out little autograph books.

People could sign them and write something. In the front of these there was room for personal information to be filled in. One page invited you to make up a personal motto and enter it.

The personal motto I made up was, “Work like everything depended on you; pray like everything depended on God.” That may sound like a precocious statement coming from a thirteen year old.

On the other hand, because of both my family background and my constant interaction with the aforementioned Jesuits, I don’t think it is. It flowed naturally from me.

And given that statement I guess you could say I’m not an atheist. Yes, I believe in God. But what, exactly, does the very word ‘atheist’ mean? Does it really mean you don’t believe in God, that God does not exist, at least for you?

Let’s explore that idea. The formal, dictionary definition of the word atheist is “a person who does not believe in the existence of a god or any gods.” That sounds straightforward,. But is it? Indeed, despite this definition, I am always fascinated when someone claims they not believe in a god or gods.

Why? This may sound a little academic but from a philosophical point of view— please note: *not* from a religious point of view, from a philosophical point of view— the very idea of the existence of a god or gods is what’s called an a-priori concept. Here’s an easy way to understand what an a priori concept is. It’s a starting point which cannot be superceded. It’s the place everyone has to start, must start.

So, to say there *is* a god or there *are* gods *or* to say on the other hand there is *no* god or there *are no* gods is exactly the same starting point. If someone says there is no god or are no gods— fine. That statement, by

definition, is a starting point. That statement becomes a god of some kind. That statement becomes a god and even is a god.

Now, that's only a minor paradox. Here's a major paradox.

In our society a lot of people *claim* to believe in God. But at the same time a lot of people also act as if everything depended on them. They act as if their efforts, their wisdom, their ability to keep all the little planets of their own concerns in perfect orbit around the great sun of their own inner self is what makes things happen.

Indeed, here are some verbal hallmarks you may have heard from folks who display this kind of behavior. "I can handle all this by myself." "Don't worry about me." "Yup, I'm just fine." (Slight pause.)

Theologian and pastor Nadia Bolz Weber calls this type of behavior "functional atheism." Do note: what I just described are people who both believe in God but act like atheists since they believe they are in control of the universe. Hence, the term "functional atheism." [1]

I need to add something to that: one of the great difficulties of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is our isolation from each other. But therefore, one of the great difficulties of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is our isolation from God.

What produces isolation? Good question. There are probably a multitude of reasons. But let me focus on one.

Many of us are allergic to asking for help for fear being thought of as "needy." Some of us would walk off a cliff rather than to show vulnerability to another human being. Some of us would walk off a cliff rather than to show vulnerability by turning to God in prayer, by trusting God. When it comes to this kind of behavior independence is a watchword. (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest we are just as God made us. And that includes sometimes needing help. Indeed, I would suggest not only that God made us. God calls us to fit together. God call us to rely on one another. We are interlocking parts.

A reality of human existence is not independence but interdependence. Interdependence is a reality of God's call to humanity. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in Second Corinthians: "...unbelieving minds have been kept from seeing by the god of this world, the god of the present age, so that they do not see the light, the splendor of the Gospel showing forth form the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (Slight pause.)

Well, I am sure the earlier explanation about god or gods being an a priori concept sounded like a journey through philosophy, sounded very academic. The explanation I am about to offer is not at all academic and it's brief.

None of us are really atheists. Why? We all have a god or gods of some kind. All these gods are gods we created but they are gods none-the-less. You can probably name them all so I don't feel I need to.

That having been said, I think there is a specific kind of god Nadia Bolz Weber delineates when she uses the label 'functional atheism.' That god, the god Weber addresses would be... us. Sometimes we think we are god. Or in the famous words of the cartoonist Walt Kelly— "We have met the enemy and they is us."

Us is, in fact, a god Paul singles out in this passage. Paul's words insists we are not God. Paul insists the world

does not revolve around us. (Quote:) “For we do not proclaim ourselves; it is not ourselves we preach; we proclaim Jesus, the Christ, as Sovereign and ourselves as workers for the sake of Jesus.”

*We do not proclaim ourselves.* One of my mentors in ministry, the Rev. Carol Anderson, often told this joke. “God created us,” she said, “God created us in God’s own image and we... returned the favor.” (Slight pause.)

Back when I was working in theater there was a play on Broadway with one of the best play titles ever. *Your Arms Are Too Short to Box with God*. The play was based on the Gospel we know as Matthew. The title itself, however, is taken from a poem, *The Prodigal Son*, by the African-American poet James Weldon Johnson.

For me that title— *Your Arms Are Too Short to Box with God*— is the point Paul is making. Our arms *are* too short to box with God. Boxing with God, fighting with God, is not a good idea. Working with and within the Dominion of God, participating with God in the Dominion of God— meaning working with God and with each other right here, right now— is our call and our calling.

All that leads me to the words of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Saint, Teresa of Ávila. “Christ has no body but yours, / No hands, no feet on earth but yours, / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / Compassion on this world, / Yours are the feet with which he / walks to do good, / Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. / Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, / Yours are the eyes, you are his body. / Christ has no body now but yours, / No hands, no feet on earth but yours, / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / compassion on this world. / Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” (Slight pause.)

We are, all of us, God’s children. We are, all of us, meant to be as one. We are, all of us, called to do the work of God— now.

You see, these are the last words from the passage from 2 Corinthians today: “For God, Who has said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts, so that we, in turn, might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ.” *So that we, in turn, might make known the glory of God.* Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “As a follow up to my earlier comments let me offer this. Not only do we live in a world of constant change, God calls us to change. Now, most people think there are only two responses to change. Dig in and resist change or go with the flow, go in the direction change seems to be taking. But there is a third choice and I think it’s the place to which God calls us. Purposefully and as much as possible channel change so things change for the betterment of all people, for the good of all people, not just for the benefit of the few. And I think that sums up our real work in the Dominion: strive toward life altering change for the good.”

BENEDICTION: Let us go in joy and in love and in peace. God reigns. Therefore, let us go forth in the name of Christ proclaiming the peace of God which surpasses understanding. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the presence of Christ be with us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.

[1] Some of this verbiage is appropriated from this article by Rev. Molly Baskette.

[http://www.ucc.org/daily\\_devotional\\_functional\\_atheism\\_1?utm\\_campaign=dd\\_feb6\\_18&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_functional_atheism_1?utm_campaign=dd_feb6_18&utm_medium=email)

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