

## Online Appendix A, Supplement 2

### **Monotheist Religious Innovation as Backfiring Detheology**

A thought experiment was proposed in the “Introduction” to the print version of this book, in the following words: “Viewed through such atheist mystic eyes, something of this impulse to revolt is discernible even in the innovations of the great religious geniuses and reformers who worked strictly within the horizons of monotheism—for example, the attempt to distance and deconcretize and depopulate the realm of divinity in the Hebrew Prophets, the attempt to prioritize inclusive love over exclusionary judgment in the Gospels, the attempt to bring God and man into deeper bilateral communion in the doctrine of the Incarnation of one of the Persons of an eternally triune God, the attempt to assuage the hopeless akrasia of servitude to the divine Law in St. Paul, the attempt to escape the threat of judgment lurking in God’s demands for holiness in Luther, and so on. In this light we can begin to see all these as laudable repeated attempts at *increased* ‘detheification,’ each of which, however, shipwrecks tragically on the still unrenounced idea of God, predictably backfiring into exacerbations of the initial problem to precisely the degree that a purposive ultimate consciousness (i.e., God) remains in the picture. Viewed through this lens, each one shows evidence of noticing something crippling about the idea of purposive personality as unilateral ultimate controller of the world, and each introduces new tweaks to eliminate the problem while somehow retaining the God idea; but there is something about the structure of that idea itself that causes each such attempt to actually end up making the original problem worse.”

How would such a thought experiment go? We can easily see one of the primary gestures of Hebrew monotheism already mentioned—the oddly obsessive detestation of idolatry, of the worshipping of any palpable and visible God—as a primary instance of God-hatred: the Hebrew prophets appear to be disgusted and incensed by any interaction with divinity that appears to take it *literally*, as something really existing in the world as things exist in the world—recognizable, visible, palpable—and try to wedge it out with an invisible God who cannot be represented in

any way. In a certain sense, the Hebrew prophets want *less* “goddiness” in the world, not more. The only goddiness now allowed is that of a God always distanced, absent, obligating, calling, demanding—all modes of presence as postponement, as absence—but never simply and fully present as part of the world.<sup>1</sup> The unfortunate by-product of this iconoclasm, however, is a henotheistic and finally the monotheistic God, omnipresent by virtue of his omni-absence, whose ever more exaggerated powers and status, meant to press gods out of every corner of the world, only end up making this revised form of divinity inescapable. Now a hysterical cycle of duties and rituals moves into position as the only manner in which the presence of God can be made manifest and the absence of palpable divinities ensured: as the demand (along with lots of promises and threats) and the response to his demand.

We might quite plausibly attribute a more cynical motive to this procedure: the desire to reduce the promiscuous proliferation of goddiness in the world is an attempt to acquire a monopoly. Too much divinity in the world means too many loci of divine authority, too many alternate points of access. When the essence of divinity is reduced to the need to provide guidance, to issue commands, in short to exert control, there must be unity and the destruction of competitors; as with a secular ruler, there will be a conflict if there are more than one. That seems not just plausible but, on Occam’s Razor grounds, rather likely to me. But it is not the point here; the point is that the energy directed to eliminating alternate sources of divine authority is what we may identify as what is genuinely “spiritual” about this trend. They may well have wanted to contain and control the source of access to the divine, but what we now see as thrilling and liberating about this process, what gives it its continuing spiritual appeal, is what it knocked down, not what it set up. The spirit soars as it is liberated from any and every form of concrete divine authority, wielded by any mountebank who could set up a statue; unfortunately this could perhaps only be done at first by an obsessive attempt to create a monopoly of divine authority. From the point of view of anyone outside the enjoyers of that monopoly, what appeals is the destruction of divinity’s ability to control the earth, not the unfortunate residual divinity, gathered up into one place and thereby increased in its sum ability to exert control: that is at best

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<sup>1</sup> See again J.-L. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York:Fordham University Press, 2008), and also Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, translated by Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010)

the comical, ironic side-effect, which awaits further handling by the very impulse which first established it, the attempt to eliminate divine control.

We may discern the same sort of backfiring structure in the canonical Gospels (whether ultimately attributable to their protagonist as a historical figure or to the various authors of these texts).<sup>2</sup> This case is discussed in more detail in online appendix A, supplement 7, “Why So Hard on Love Incarnate?” but it deserves at least a brief summary in the present context as well. For we might easily detect in the Gospels an attempted pushback against the overbearing presence of divine control as enforcer of some purposive preference, a pushback against the exclusivity of choice and purpose in favor of an expansive inclusivity. This begins to strain at the limits of personhood and purposivity per se, inasmuch as these entail above all *judgment*, in both its cognitive and its moral sense: a cognitive judgment means that “this” is identified in distinction to “that,” particulars are sundered from their immediate context of appearance and reorganized into individually unified but mutually distinct universal essences--one and only one such true recontextualization allowed for each, revealing its one and only true essence in contradistinction to every other essence; what it is is separated from what it is not as well as from what it only appears to be. This cognitive sense of judgment bleeds into the moral sense of judgment: what is good is divided from what is not good, what serves the purpose divided from what does not. Only persons as persons do this, and arguably only count as persons to the extent that they do (see Chapter 3 below). But *God* as judge means not the mere *existence* or operation of the capacity of judgment, as in a finite personality, but the *ultimacy* of judgment, the ultimacy (not merely the presence) of personality, purpose. Apparently against this, an attempt is made in the Gospels to highlight an accepting, inclusive, unifying, non-judgmental aspect of personhood—

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<sup>2</sup> I am treating the canonical Gospels en masse here, even though they are four very disparate and heterogeneous texts, written at different times and with discernibly different agendas which construct discernibly different characters for their protagonist. My low-bar claim is simply that the four Gospels read en masse are what constitute the character of Jesus as presented by orthodox Christian tradition, and thus “Jesus” as a cultural marker signifies at the very least and primarily the protagonist of all four of these texts considered together, on the (probably false) ideal reader’s presupposition that they are four views on an actual person/deity. This entitles us to read the unresolved conflicts in *all four* Gospels as resolved by the explicit resolutions of these tensions in any of them. The explicit resolution, i.e., the apocalyptic combination of inclusive love as means and exclusive judgment as ultimate goal, occurs in Matthew and Luke most clearly. But the same structure is discernible also in Mark and John. The high-bar claim would be that each gospel individually can also be best understood, and indeed is only coherent, on this premise of “monistic” dualism, though with varying emphases and degrees of explicit apocalypticism; but this claim would take more time to demonstrate than is available here.

namely, *love*. But the meaning of love is radically different when attributed to a *finite* person, where it may well be non-judgmental, accepting, inclusive, and when to an *infinite and ultimate* Person—where love undergoes an alarming reversal. In other words, we can imagine a finite person who, in spite of being a judge as all persons qua agents must be, is nonetheless also loving and non-judgmental, for this personhood is rooted in, and constantly interfused with, her own non-personal aspect, those aspects of *herself* that are at odds with her own purposes and judgments, but which can nonetheless be recognized and accepted as herself. The case is very different for an infinite, absolute, ultimate Personhood such as that attributed to the loving God, and this alters the character of that love—since love must now be somehow ultimately subsumed in and subordinated to the defining attribute of personhood and purposivity: judgment.<sup>3</sup> And this is just what we can see playing out in the case at hand. The canonical Gospels as we have them center on a very complex figure who illustrates well what happens to attempts at clearing away these offending aspects when, perhaps with the best intentions, the notion of a personal God, or even a post-personal God which nevertheless still cannot shed the marks of its initial modeling, remains the final word. As explored in detail in online supplement 7, “Why So Hard on Love Incarnate,” we take our clue here in the explanation given by the figure of Jesus himself when explaining how the two opposed trends of judgment and non-judgment in his teaching are related, which one is the ultimate goal and which one is the provisional means, which one is meant to subsume the other and which to be subsumed by the other (Matthew 13:37-43). We have the two opposed trends in their starkest form in this passage, but also combined in a single idea that is perfectly clear and intelligible: Jesus explains to his closest disciples, after sending away the masses perplexed by his obscure parable, the inner meaning of its seeming tension between judgment and nonjudgment, revealing in quite explicitly and unambiguously which is end and which is means, which is the goal and which is a mere temporary method of getting to that goal. Wheat is sown by a good farmer, but tares are then sown by his enemy in the same field. The two grow up alongside one another, intertwined from one another. The parable advises us not to excise those evil weeds—yet. They are to be accepted and tolerated alongside the good

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<sup>3</sup> We will take up this case in more detail below in Chapter 3, in the section “Love Contra the Ultimacy of Personhood” and online appendix A, supplement 7, “Why So Hard on Love Incarnate?”

wheat—just as we are told in the Sermon on the Mount that the God bestows his sun and rain on the good and the evil alike in this world. The note of nonjudgment is sounded here: resist not evil, love your enemies. But it turns out this is just a temporary measure. The point is to allow both plants to grow to their full extent, showing their true character. Then, at the “harvest,”—the day of judgment—the two can be cleanly separated. Then the good wheat will be gathered safely into the farmer’s coffers (presumably for the purpose of being *eaten* by him, by the way—but no matter), while the tares will be burned, annihilated, destroyed. The point of the temporary tolerance, the period of non-judgment, is to enable a more severe and thoroughgoing judgment and intolerance at the end of the story. The takeaway is crystal clear. Absolute moral dualism prevails. Hatred for these evil people, spawn of the devil, is the ultimate truth, the ultimate goal, for God hates them so much that He is planning to destroy them. Loving tolerance of them is here presented as a *regrettable but unavoidable temporary measure*. Good people and evil people, in this story from the mouth of Jesus, come from two absolutely different sources, have nothing in common except for the fact that they are temporarily mixed together in this world. We are told not to destroy the evil tares *yet*, lest the wheat be destroyed too. The reason explicitly given for this temporary restraint of rightful desire to destroy these bad seeds is so that the two can be more clearly separated *later*, so that the tares can be *destroyed*. The allowing of the inclusion of the two is a means, a regrettable necessary evil: in the end, there is to be absolute separation. Separation, rejection, exclusion is the ultimate goal; tolerance, acceptance, indiscriminating love is the inconvenient temporary means to better achieve that violent goal in the end. “Let a hundred flowers bloom!”—so we can see more clearly where later to apply the blade. God the draconian controller and judge is further entrenched through this seeming attempt to unseat Him—as long as the premise of the existence of any kind of personal and purposive God remains in any sense in place.<sup>4</sup>

All this may seem to be perfectly reasonable, a wise policy for separating good from evil, as long as we accept two premises: 1) that good and evil per se are and should be absolutely incommensurate, unmixed, can admit of not overlap or coextensivity, i.e., absolute moral

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<sup>4</sup> A more expansive exploration of the backfiring structure of “love” as presented in the figure of Jesus as presented in the Gospels can be found in Online Supplement “Why So Hard on Love Incarnate.”

dualism deprived of all ethical nuance, and 2) that promises and threats of future rewards and punishment are the only effective way to motivate ethical behavior, conceived as rooted in the prudential calculus of purposive conscious agents—again, a rejection of any more nuanced vision of human ethical motivation. But both of these premises are in fact bound up with the *Noûs as Arché* premises of monotheistic thinking, with which they stand or fall. Indeed, we might suggest that it is a reliable sign that one has internalized the aftermath of these premises, as is increasingly the case in almost all modern civilizations, that one regards the ideas of the ultimacy of judgment and punishment as necessary, reasonable, unobjectionable, a-ok; ditto the idea of the world as a testing ground deliberately beset with temptations in which free-willed conscious agents are given a chance to prove their worth; ditto the idea that good and evil must ultimately be completely separated and evil destroyed—all of which can easily be read, in the absence of those premises, as hateful, cruel, and deeply offensive to basic human decency. In such a climate it becomes harder and harder to grok alternate conceptions of morality, even those that are just as unremittingly prudential and self-interested, where morality is just a long-term calculation about what is best for oneself (leaving aside for the moment whether it could ever be anything else). But the conception of the self in whose interest this is, what those interests are, and what kind of world there is both for and against those interests, is radically different in each case.<sup>5</sup> Given the narrowing of selfhood to mere personality and purpose, and the concomitantly absolute separation of self from non-self, gain and loss become a zero-sum game, and it starts to seem perfectly reasonable to do whatever it takes to pass the test imposed by the most powerful self, God, in order to obtain what the self wants (eternal life, blessedness) rather than what it does not want (annihilation, torture), allowing only those who fail that test can have to take the stuff one's own self doesn't want—and with a feeling that this is just and right. For personal selves are like that, conscious purposes are like that: they want this and not that; this is me and that is you. Whatever that most powerful self wants is the way it is, and if He says it's good to do this or that, whether or not it seems to us to accord with our own spiritual or material interests,

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<sup>5</sup>E.g., morality as depending not on punishment administered by a judge to be worshipped but merely on necessary consequences without need for a judge, and certainly not one that is to be worshipped (Buddhism—and note that karma, a nonpersonal force that accounts for the continuity of consequences, is not only not to be worshipped, but is precisely what is to be transcended), or morality motivated by internal dispositions rather than external threats and promises of gain and loss (Mencian Confucianism).

then it's good, and that, given his power, is what is ultimately good for us—He's the boss, the creator, the show-runner. It is the *ultimacy* of a personal purposive being, that is, inevitably a *judge*, that thwarts all attempts of a less dualistic moral stance to gain ascendancy. The personal God as ultimate, agency as ultimate, judgment as ultimate, ensures that the attempt at inclusive love will backfire, turning into exclusivity on steroids: the eternal separation of the elect and the damned.

We can perhaps discern a similar backfiring structure in another distinctive move of Christianity, the attempt really to make of God “a companion--a fellow-sufferer who understands,” as A.N. Whitehead averred.<sup>6</sup> This too has everything to do with a response to God as ultimate determiner, as judge, as *controller*. For with the help of certain understandings of the doctrine of the Trinity, we might be able to view Christ's sufferings on the cross as a way of integrating this suffering humanness into the very being of God, intended as a way to bring God closer to man, to overcome the mutual externality of God and man, to alleviate some of the power imbalance of God's unilateral control and power. God himself comes to personally experience the powerlessness of being human, the susceptibility to torture and death—i.e., God Himself experiencing the loss of control, the impotence of one's purposive intentions to serve as the ultimate source and controller of what happens to one. God literally suffers, in the sense of being passively at the mercy of external forces. God's sufferings are both an instantiation of solidarity with suffering humanity and an exemplar of how that suffering is to be borne. And most significantly for our concerns here, if we calibrate Trinitarianism with the Incarnation in a certain way, this will not be an adventitious venture on God's part, but something that is built-into his very nature: to become man, to suffer, to renounce his omnipotence. God, to be God, must be both omnipotent and not omnipotent. True omnipotence, that is, is the power not to always be omnipotent—a beautiful and profoundly true idea, of great significance also for atheist mysticism, as we shall see in Part Two. But in the present context it is worth noticing, first, that we can detect in this an attempted pushback against a felt horror at the idea of ceaseless unilateral purposive control, and second, how miserably this palliative fails in its attempt to reduce this horror, as long as the basic premises of theism remain *at all* in place. The four

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<sup>6</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 351.

canonical Gospels are conflicted on whether the crucified Christ knows in advance that everything would work out okay: on the one hand we have “Today you will be with me in paradise,” (Luke) but also the famous “My Lord, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew, Mark). The latter point of view is stressed by those, like Žižek, following Chesterton, who want to see an experience of real finitude in the Passion: Christ would have to really have no control, really not know that he is God, at least for a moment--and further, not to even know *what’s going on*, what the meaning of all this is, how it’s all going to work out. For we finite humans generally don’t. This would make “not being in control, not fully knowing oneself, not knowing what’s really going on here”—pretty central entailments of real finitude and particularity—at least an element, a “moment” of God himself, in good Hegelian fashion. God’s self-blockage, God’s non-knowing of his own nature, would be in some sense part of the nature of God. This would indeed take some of the edge off the oppressiveness of the divinization of single-purpose control, allowing divinity to at least include some element of necessary uncontrolled ignorance, so that even our human experience of non-control of our own experiences, endemic to finite existence, could be recognized as divine in its own right, and even omniscience would have to at least sometimes forget itself, however briefly, in order to really be omniscience.

But the Trinitarian structure plays an ambiguous role here. On the one hand it ensures that at least the capacity for this incomplete self-knowledge and non-total control, via Incarnation, is a *necessary* dimension of divinity. But at the same time this very structure works as a hedge *against* such non-control and unknowing going on *all the time* even in the Second Person of God, the Son. If one objects to this temporalizing language for the eternity of God, in which there is arguably no time, we can restate the point in terms of the acts of will or interventions in the world of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos through which the world was made; both in the role taken by the Logos during the creation, and in whatever shady Old Testament appearances are attributed to Him, He is not in a state of finite ignorance and loss of control. More, this ignorance and non-control cannot be operative at *any* “time” in the *all* Persons of God, since, unless we adopt the Sabellian heresy of patripassianism, the other Persons of the Trinity are presumably undergoing no such predicament. Even if we accept the seemingly omniscient point that each of the Person’s is fully God, that is, the entirety of God, God per se,



this is bought at the cost of an absolute mutual exclusivity between what it is to *be* something (in this case, God), and what it is to be a relation-aspect that being is functioning as (the Persons): asness and isness are thus sundered to accomplish this faux omniscience, as the anathematization of patripassianism clearly shows. And we should note in passing that this vaguely omniscient structure of the Persons of the Trinity, whereby each instantiation is in fact the whole of what is instantiated, is no Trinitarian breakthrough; it is what applied to *everything non-material without exception* in the Plotinian Neo-Platonism from which the Church Fathers were cribbing their ideas: for Plotinus, *the entirety* of the World-Soul (*psyche*) is operative as every animate act, and *the entirety* of *Noûs* is operative as every Intellection and as every Intelligible. The separation into mere parts and wholes, let alone separate substances, was purely due to the divisions imposed by matter. Christian Trinitarianism in effect drained the entire spiritual world of this omniscient structure, leaving one little puddle behind and monopolizing it for the Trinity alone. Our souls are no longer the entire world-soul, and our Ideas are no longer the entirety of divine *Noûs* itself. Even our souls and our understandings are now divided into separable chunks of this versus that, me versus you—again the basic derivative structure of *Noûs as Arché*. Indeed, the orthodox doctrine of dyophysitism in the hypostatic union of Christ preserves this mutual exclusivity even in the case of Christ, simply kicking the can up another level: two “natures” are joined in one being, but the two souls are still two souls, subject to the same old “this is this, that is that” that governs everything and everyone under the *Noûs as Arché* regime. The miaphysite alternative—positing a single nature that was itself both fully divine and fully human--was bound to fail in this climate, for there seemed to be no conceptual resources available to make it intelligible, or rather to constrict it to a single instance rather than spreading to applicability to all souls, or indeed all essences, without exception—as it were, to restore miaphysite status to all beings, which would land us in Tiantai Buddhism, where each quiddity, just as it is, is fully itself and fully every conceivable alternative, simply because to be as such is to be ambiguous: essences as such are miaphysite, to be any essence is always also to be every other essence (for if 1 is 1+1, then 1+1 is 1+1+1, since (1+1) is also a 1, and so on); what it is to be a demon (or an animal, or a god, or a human, etc.) *just is* what it is to be a buddha (or an animal, or a god, or a human, etc.). That ontological ambiguity is precisely what is most

anathema to the ultimate dichotomization of all being that it the very essence of *Noûs as Arché* thinking, and thus of monotheism as such, precisely what it is designed to most strenuously exclude. This is perhaps why modern defenders of miaphysitism, to the extent that there are any, are consistently obliged to show that it really ends up amounting to the same thing as dyophysitism, differing only nominally and not substantially, thus safeguarding the unique status of Christ and evading the subsequent Tiantai apocalypse that would end not only Christ's monopoly on divinity but monotheism itself.

Be that as it may, it is certain that Christ's special status is present from before the beginning of the world, even if lost sight of for a moment by one of the Persons of the Trinity and soon recovered; the case is thus once again profoundly unequal to that of the ordinary human ignorance and despair of the mortal seeker; the original gulf between God and man is now duplicated in a new key. In other words, it is not *every* instance of forgetting and lack of control that contribute to, or are essential to, God being God, but just this one. "Lack of control" per se is not what is accepted as integral to God here, only certain very circumscribed instances of lack of control—which amounts to a *controlled* portion of lack of control. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that the loss of control is severely limited in character: it is never depicted as also *moral* imperfection, as is the case with genuine human finitude. For Christian theology has generally taken it that Christ, even in his human nature, is perfect, and perfectly in control at least of his own actions even when he allows external circumstances beyond his control to affect him. His suffering is taken on voluntarily, initially with full consciousness of what he was doing and why, and he remains steadfast in his purpose to bear this suffering. This changes the picture completely, giving us a severely narrowed picture of the range of finitude that can be considered essential to the divine. Christ's passivity, his "suffering," which is supposed to be that of a real human, can never be real as long as it is in any sense *voluntarily taken on and purposefully endured*. That's not how it usually is for us humans. We not only suffer the effects of events beyond our control; our very lives are stitched together with lived cross-purposes and non-purposes, doing something unintended or half-intended much of the time. We don't choose in advance to be uncontrolled, and we don't get to cease to be uncontrolled afterwards, remembering then that all along we could have controlled everything. For the crucifixion really

to work as a full affirmation of the divinity of the uncontrolled per se as intrinsic to the divine, Christ should not have been in any way special: he should have been a sinner, an idiot, a jerk, chosen literally at random (or is this the secret meaning of “difficult” incidents like Christ’s cursing of the fig tree, *inter alia*?). So the laudable attempt to dispel the key theistic premise—a single controlling purpose having unilateral authority over everything—again backfires: the attempt to make God man, to get rid of the domineering power of God over man, instead makes the one man who is in his very finitude also God more powerful than all others, demanding—often, and in so many words—fealty and obedience, and in some ways even more powerful than simple-minded God the Father, who knew how to be omnipotent *only* by being omnipotent: He didn’t yet know how to be all the more powerful and omnipresent by taking on a few hours worth of finitude, by showing how to be strong even by being weak for awhile, to dominate even by being passive. God remains the unilateral creator and judge, somehow or other, by hook or by crook; the weakness turns out to be a tool in the hands of strength, a way to test and judge all the more ruthlessly in the end.

Nor does the concrete presence of God on the earth in human form at all alleviate the separateness between God and man: on the contrary, when the brooding ghostly omnipresence of God, insubstantial but unlocatable and unpicturable like the wind, impossible to pin down to any specific location or face, is changed into the concrete presence of a man of flesh and blood amongst us in a particular time and place, with a particular (and to some quite off-putting) personality, style, appearance, gender, ethnicity, historical setting, the mutual externality of specific embodied persons now applies to our relationship, initiating all the complications of ambivalence that are endemic to any human relationship of mutual recognition: double, model, rival. Each of us is just where we are, in this particular place and time, each outside the other. This humanization of God in this sense actually ends up *intensifying* the breach between God and man, widening the gap to the size of that which exists between one particular instantiation of humanity and all the others: the one who was also God and all the others who aren’t. In the words of (the pre-Christian) Bob Dylan: “I said, ‘They refused Jesus too.’ He said, ‘You’re not him.’” The God-man remains someone *else*, another person who lived and died elsewhere, an other standing over against me, possessing the godhood I lack and lording it over me, literally.

God's identity with man, far from giving the entailments of Godhood to each of us as human, serves instead to intensify the breach between one particular human and all other humans, and concomitantly also between humanity and God. The disparity in power is also, contrary to expectation, exacerbated rather than alleviated by this humanization. Prior to the Incarnation, God was powerful and we were weak, so we weren't him and we couldn't escape him. Now, God is powerful enough to be not just powerful but also weak like us, while we can *only* be weak. But weakness really simply *means* that our ability to be both any particular way *and otherwise* is limited; the ability to be both weak and strong, rather than only to be weak or only to be strong, is just more strength. Now even our prerogative of weakness and passivity has been stolen from us, monopolized, like everything else. The attempt to rid the world of the overbearingly godly control of an overpowering external judge once again only brought more of it.<sup>7</sup>

Let's consider another prominent case. We could view the advent of the inescapable and unfulfillable Law as the new mode of God's presence, the regrettable side-effect of the laudable attempt of the ancient Hebrews to at least have *less* of the divine around than all their neighbors, which we would like to see as an obscure form of the atheist mystical impulse which we proudly inherit. We can then read Pauline theology as another attempt to get rid of God, which likewise fails spectacularly. Here it is the Law itself, the only remaining form of God's literal presence, which must be overcome. The crucifixion, for Paul, is the overcoming of this Law. First, we get an even more pathetically disenfranchised picture of God—now hanging from the cross, at least for an inconvenient couple of hours. The form of God's presence that Paul hated, the unsatisfiable taskmaster lording it over his slaves with threats and unfulfillable demands, is now destroyed. That is the real advance toward God-removal here, the true atheist kernel of Paul's move. But again, it comes with an unfortunate by-product: now the crucified Christ is everywhere, unescapable, and even more so: everyone, Jew and Gentile, is obligated to accept this killing of God as their new God, to have Christ born and crucified and risen in their hearts,

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<sup>7</sup> There is another particularly poignant respect in which this case exemplifies the backfiring structure. But as this depends on premises not yet explored at this point, and engages the both work of Georges Bataille, one of our key figures below, and that of René Girard, not otherwise treated in these pages, I ask the reader to consult (in due course) the online appendix A, supplement 9, "Durkheim, Bataille, and Girard on Sacrifice and the Sacred" for a fuller exposition.

but now underscored with an unprecedented level of threat: for the first time, eternal life is at stake. To fail to accept the killing of God as God makes one uniquely and massively *guilty* of something, and for the first time this new kind of guilt is inflated to a point where it is presented as *deserving* eternal death (or even eternal punishment). It used to be you could at least escape God by dying: now death is when you're really stuck with him. This works out nicely for Paul himself, perhaps: the killing of the Law turns out *not* to mean that you can now do whatever you want, without having to worry about whether God approves or not. Instead, it means you are doubly obligated: God not only *created* you (debt number one), he also freed you of your obligation to him for creating you by sacrificing his Son, and this generous gesture of releasing you from God is *another* gift from God, for which you are further obligated to him—to recognize him and be grateful to him for freeing you from your debt (debt number two). It turns out that now when you are sinning, instead of it being a failure on your part to fulfill the Law, it is an indication of something deeply wrong with you: your failure to really appreciate and accept the loving sacrifice God made to free you of obligation to him. Now it is not a failure of your action, but a failure, as it were, of your very being, prior to any particular action. Obeying the law is no longer how you get right with God; it is rather a way in which your already being right with God is manifested and verified. This gets God even deeper down into us, makes him even more inescapable. And who now gets to say which activities count as the things God doesn't like? Paul, of course. It ends up being most of the same stuff required by the old Law—no false gods, no weird sex, no self-assertive rule-breaking—but without the bits that were potentially cumbersome to the Gentiles, the bits that actually limited the extent of the God-demand upon the earth by keeping it restricted to a small ethnic community: circumcision, kosher laws, temple rituals, animal sacrifice. Now that these are removed, the Law, in its new form, can spread unimpeded. The praiseworthy attempt to get rid of God sadly yields more God.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Can we perhaps see something similar going on in the origins of Islam? I won't venture an analysis here, but in passing we might note the way "Submission" to the invisible God has an inner link to conquest of all that is visible. As long as the imageless is something to submit to, something that demands allegiance rather than something it is impossible not to have allegiance to, as long as there is an either/or choice between image and imageless, this submission to the imageless is at the same time a demand for domination of all images. To subordinate oneself to the formless, rather than seeing all forms as also formless, is to subordinate all form. Domination, however, is the essence of the godishness of idols that was supposed to be overcome. Less of God once again turned out to be more.

To walk through just one more instance for now, this dynamic is on vivid display also in the Protestant Reformation as conceived by Martin Luther. Luther's first-order hatred of God is famously palpable, and quite boldly avowed—and for many of the same reasons we have adduced above: God as righteous judge of man's failure to live up to His expectations is seen very clearly as something that any human being could only violently hate: "I did not love, indeed I hated this righteous God who punishes sinners, and in secret if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I murmured immoderately, indignant at God, saying: 'As if it truly is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost due to original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the law of the Decalogue, but God then adds pain upon pain through the gospel, and through the gospel also threatens us with his righteousness and wrath!'"<sup>9</sup> Here Luther expresses precisely the entirely natural response of an impartial reader of the Bible: this is horrible, and this God is anything but worthy of love. Especially noteworthy is that this emphatically includes the personality and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels: the New Testament ("the gospel") is *even worse* than the Old, equipped with even more threats of righteousness and wrath, *even more* hateful because now, for the first time, none other than Jesus Christ adds even the threat of eternal punishment, far worse than the merely temporal punishments of the Old Testament. Luther tries to find a way out, the opening shot of the Reformation: the "righteousness of God" is to be read "passively": it means not God's righteousness in judging us, but the righteousness He imparts to us, or at least attributes to us, as a consequence of our faith in the claim that Christ has delivered us from precisely God's righteousness in the "active" sense of judgment and punishment. We get God's righteousness in the form of "being considered righteous by God." Luther compares this faith to the ring binding in marriage a filthy whore (our evil soul) and a distinguished virtuous gentleman (Christ): on the one hand, the property of both now becomes shared, so the wife's debts now belong to and are to be handled by the husband. On the other hand, the husband's wealth is owned in common with the wife—legally, Christ now has shared ownership of our sins and we have shared ownership of Christ's righteousness. On the most generous reading of this doctrine, the love we now feel for this gratuitous gift—we, this common

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<sup>9</sup> Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of the Latin Writings (1545)," translated by Tryntje Helfferich, in *Martin Luther: The Essential Luther* (Hackett, 2018).

whore, are grateful to this fine virtuous man for unexpectedly loving and accepting and standing up for us—we may now start to actually be influenced by his virtue, rather than hating and rejecting it as we would before the marriage, when we could assume this fine gent would have only contempt for a whore like ourselves. Hence, on this reading, we can be expected to actually get more virtuous to whatever extent that is possible for us. But whether we do or not, we are justified as long as our faith endures—that is, as long as we believe ourselves to be justified, as long as we believe we have been accepted into this marriage, that all we have is his and all he has is ours.

The shift to a kind of performativity in this faith has been noted, by both critics and defenders: believing God regards us as righteous makes us righteous, we are as we believe we are, our own regarding it as so now makes it so—the exact opposite of what belief in God as creator and controller of the world, and adjudicator of our fates, would make us expect, which was exactly what made God so hateful (to Luther and, still now, to us). Quite a stroke of genius, and with world-historical consequences! And in its own way, also *true*—insofar as the whole problem of justification in the eyes of God exists only to the extent that one thinks it does, simply no longer seeing it as a problem for oneself makes it the case that it is not a problem (simple atheism also does this work). We seem to be quite close to the open air of atheism here. But once again, this attempt to overcome the objectionable nature of the idea of God the creator and judge backfires—precisely because of the intrinsic limits of the idea of God. Luther devised ingenious exegetical moves to try to overcome the *prima facie* problems this view confronted in the face of Christian scripture, and often does a pretty good job of it. But the only way this anti-God conception could be made compatible with the founding idea of God, as long as it was maintained that God *does* really exist and the Bible *does* mean that He created and will judge the world, was to exacerbate the threat of damnation and the dualistic divide between saved and damned, between believer and unbeliever—and even between faith and doubt within the believer. If this was intended to eliminate what originally horrified Luther so—the threat of eternal judgment and punishment brought into the world by the preaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels—it obviously failed miserably: it merely displaced it onto others. The horribleness of this judging God is still there in spades, but now it is not *us* for whom this is horrible, it is only

the unbelievers who have reason to hate this, for they alone will receive God's wrath. (And if belief were simply a black and white yes or no proposition, that would indeed solve the problem for everyone: for the believers because they could be sure they were saved, and for the unbelievers because they didn't believe the claims of the believers that they would be damned.) Perhaps we could be vicious enough not to mind this trait in our "husband," to feel love for him in gratitude for his acceptance of our whoring self, and not finding anything repellent about his peevish violent condemnation and punishment of all the other whores he didn't marry (i.e., those who rejected his proposal of marriage), though it is depressing to think so, and it is hard to see how this model of righteousness would be a good influence on us and help make us more righteous. But even for Luther we are not so perverse as that: it still seems that even for him this set-up wasn't supposed to make God loveable (as if one could justify his treatment of the damned, saying to them in effect, hey, he gave you a chance, all you had to do was have faith, easy-peasy—so it's not like he's being unreasonable in condemning you to hell or anything like that). That's not plausible even to Luther; the love of God, faith itself, can only come as a gift from God Himself—which means there's still nothing naturally intelligible about loving such a God: no good reason for it is discernible to any human being. By any standard available to natural (fallen!) human sentiment or Reason, "the Devil's whore," this God still understandably inspires our hatred.

But the outcome of this valiant but bungled and semi-conscious attempt to get rid of God is even worse and more ironic than that. One's faith, (like Fichte's "I" or "self," which in this sense can be seen as likely a direct descendent of Luther, *mutatis mutandis*), exists only so long and insofar as it posits itself. Again, there is a deep truth here, in Luther's case as in Fichte's, having to do with the irreducibly performative nature of all experienced reality—and in both cases, its true radicality is lost due to the theistic inheritance which ultimately models it on the imagined creative deed of a personal God, i.e., in terms of purposive categories like *commitment*, *deliberate control and will*. For there is perhaps one sense in which such a self-positing *always and inevitable* is going on as the condition of all selfhood, if and only if the latter is conceived not in terms of purpose and control but instead as equally self and non-self, equally control and non-control—and thus should logically lead to universal salvation and the rejection of the notion



of damnation altogether. This would of course seem to be almost impossible in the face of the emphatic threats of damnation that pepper the New Testament (and the Quran), although perhaps some (later anathematized) early Christian fathers like Origen and Irenaeus had attempted it, and Luther's own exegetical ingenuity and willingness to trust the authority of the Christ born in his own heart as authoritative in matters of faith should have made it in principle attainable. But insofar as this self-positing certitude has *any specific content* (certain specific propositions about the world or about oneself), it is the opposite of inevitable: it is impossible. Every specific content so posited is necessarily always exposed to the temptation of undermining—doubt, otherness, alternate points of view, unbidden thoughts. To fight this off a pure voluntarism, the only possible recourse is obstinancy and willful blindness to the devil's whore, Reason. This is of course precisely the kind of willfulness, attempt to control thought and being, that is encoded in the idea of the creator God to begin with: to believe in such a hateful God one must overcome the hatefulness of God, and the only way to do that is to become God, i.e., the very thing that was hated about him, the unilateral power to judge and determine all on the basis of completely arbitrary and uncheckable will. That was horrible when imposed on one from without, but when one gets to be the tyrant oneself it is Christian freedom, and thus delightful. Luther himself becomes a kind of mini-me of the God he hates, issuing imperious condemnations left and right. This is another brilliant move, with much truth to it—indeed, even a fine exemplification of the Tiantai principle, later institutionalized in the Zen koan systems, that an inescapable problem can be solved only by *becoming* the problem, embodying it, making it truly inescapable in that it becomes one's very subjectivity, pervading all one's experiences but now as one's very self rather than as the problem confronting the self which remains other to it. But here of course the still unsurpassable otherness of God, and the possibility of anything objective to whatever extent it still appears in our experience, anything even contrary to our own self-positing will and assertion, is to exactly that extent a constant cause of subterranean torment and doubt—and the flip over into Calvinism, and the absolute unknowability of God's will and of one's own salvation, is a mere hairtrigger away. It is in this Uber-Calvinist flip, perhaps, following this logic to its ultimate point, that we would see the real self-overcoming of theism: if I really accept the unthinkability of God's will, and its total incommensurability with any of my corrupt finite

conceptions of the good, would it not be most pious of all to accept that God may, for reasons of His own, save and love *only* unbelievers? For all I know, faith in Himself is what he detests above all else (perhaps His apparent revelations to the contrary were just tests or deliberate traps for the damned—He has every right to do so, and we know how He likes to set up tests for us—or snares of the devil). The survival of the religion depends on finding reasons to avoid following through on this logic all the way. But to whatever extent one can hold the line (i.e., maintain confidence in one’s own assured salvation no matter what—which a Nietzsche or even a less thoroughgoing naturalist might simply call a burst of health and vigor, the sudden onset of a mood of physiologically determined self-confidence), one must oneself be just as voraciously despotic as one previously hated God for being. Might one then come instead to hate oneself? All the better, for Luther—for in being so hateful one is a sinner and thus all the more justified in the eyes of God. But here too we see the attempt to remove the hateful God as resulting in a metastasizing proliferation of precisely what was hateful about God, little God-shaped tyrants now filling the world. This also helps explain the notoriously aggressive missionary zeal of Protestantism: it becomes necessary to remove all causes for doubt in one’s faith, which keeps seeping in from outside, from mimetic contagion inherent in the mere presence of alternate points of view, which cannot but present at least the *possibility* that one is mistaken. Since to fear that you are mistaken in your conviction that you are saved is to lose the faith that saves you, you will need to do whatever you can to create an environment where no doubters of the truth of the faith are to be encountered, where there is no interference signal introducing cross-currents. It is much easier to maintain total conviction if one can create an environment where one’s conviction is universally recognized as unquestionable and built into the core assumptions of the language and institutions embedded in every social exchange. That means a commitment to exterminating all other points of view. Hence we have another notorious ironic reversal: the doctrine that “every Christian is his own pope,” seemingly making room for the legitimacy of any and every belief (at least within the bounds of Christendom) actually means every creed cannot help being committed to stamping out every other alternate belief, however slight the theological difference might be. The model of a personality in total control of his own experiences, *Noûs* as *Arché*, the

ontological ultimacy of purpose, once entrenched, becomes only the more entrenched in the attempt to remove it by precisely total control, the same model of personhood itself.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>We can discern something similar to this self-undermining structure on the receiving end of these innovations. See online appendix A, supplement 3, “What’s In It For Them: The Backfiring Structure on the Consumer Side.” Another such parallel structure, the backfiring of love in a monotheist context, is explored in Chapter 3, as well as in online appendix A, supplement 7, “Why So Hard on Love Incarnate?”