

Only an atheist can be a good Christian -Ernst Bloch (Atheist philosopher)-
Only a Christian can be a good atheist -Jürgen Moltmann (Christian theologian)-
I 'quite rightly pass' for an a/theist -Jacques Derrida (?)-

“God Is Dead” And I Don’t Feel So Good Myself: Beyond the New Atheism Debate

by

Jon Stanley

Introduction

I would like to begin with a story about the time my grandfather came to live with my parents after he was diagnosed with dementia. My mom, who is the paragon of hospitality, would check in on his lucidity every morning after fixing his large southern breakfast by asking him the same question, “Grandpa Dewey, do you know who I am?” And he would typically call her by the name of one of his sisters or aunts (Lula Belle or Pearly May, perhaps), but on one particular morning, he looked her squarely in the eyes and said, in his thick southern drawl, “Lady, if you don’t know who you are, then how the hell am I supposed to know!”

And I lead with this story because in his own way my grandfather articulated a philosophy of discourse far wiser than that which supports the dynamics of demonization that characterize the debate we’ll be discussing this evening—a debate that Brian McLaren has called a “death match.” Because as both my grandfather and the French feminist philosopher, Julia Kristeva, would say, whatever we claim to “be” or to “believe,” even in our most lucid moments, we ultimately remain “strangers to ourselves,”¹—which means, among other things, that we always have more to learn, particularly from those not like us: atheists and theists, secular and religious folk, and (not to set the bar too high but) perhaps even Colbert and O’Reilly.

I’ve given this a lot of consideration and I’ve come to the conclusion that if this lecture were an alcoholic beverage then it would be a dirty martini. And that’s because it has more than a few moments of indiscretion, but also because it’s made up of three parts: one part cultural hermeneutics, one part philosophy, and one part theology. And so I’d like to cover three things in our time together. First, I’d like to document the New Atheism Debate’s rise to prominence on the contemporary cultural scene: What’s its story? Who’s its family of origin? What are its issues (so to speak)? Second, I’d to highlight three ways in which this book² (from which the title of this lecture is drawn) attempts to make a redemptive intervention into what the philosopher, John Caputo, has described as a war between “militant faith and militant critiques of faith.” And third, because my lips have been stained both by the wine that is drunk here at Mars

¹ See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1991). It’s helpful to interpret Kristeva’s insight in light of Augustine’s infamous line in Book X of his *Confessions*: “But I beg you, O Lord my God...Have pity on me and heal me, for you see that I have become a problem [or mystery] to myself.”

² “*God is Dead*” and *I Don’t Feel so Good Myself: Theological Engagements with the New Atheism*, Andrew David, Christopher Keller, Jon Stanley, eds. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

Hill, and by other wines in the years since I was a student (I really like wine), I'd like to conclude by outlining my own unique response to the New Atheism Debate, one that I hope is heard as speaking both from out of, and back to, Mars Hill.

§1

A “Hot” Culture War (of fundamentalisms?): The Background and Rise of the New Atheism Debate

First coined in a 2006 interview in *Wired* magazine, “the New Atheism” has come to refer to the movement shaped by the best-selling books of five authors—Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (collectively yet unaffectionately referred to by the Marxist cultural and literary critic, Terry Eagleton, in the Yale *Terry Lectures* as “Ditchkins”³) and then Sam Harris, Victor Stenger, and Daniel Dennet. The titles of their books are brash, if not a bit histrionic. You’ve likely heard of them: (1) *The End of Faith*; (2) *The God Delusion*; (3) *God. The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Proves that God Does Not Exist*; and most to the point (4) *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. And, more popularly, of course, there is Philip Pullman’s young-reader trilogy, the atheist-ying to C.S. Lewis’ theist-yang. This crew is smart, and they know it, (often referring to themselves as “brighties”), they are angry, well connected, and have gained enough cultural traction that one of their bestsellers even topped the *New York Times* list for fifty-one weeks straight (take that, Oprah!).

And if we are to speak of not just of “the New Atheism” but more broadly of “the New Atheism Debate” then we would also be referring to books that flew off the presses in critical response to them—books whose titles are every bit as brash, if not histrionic. There is: (1) *The Dawkins Delusion*; (2) *Atheist Delusions*; (3) *The Delusion of Disbelief*; (4) and, the ever-charitable title—*The Devil’s Delusion*. And of course, whether you get your news from O’Reilly’s *Factor* or Colbert’s *Report*, you know this religious front of the “culture wars” is only getting hotter.

As any Mars Hill student will tell you, therapeutically, if you want to get to the heart of violence (culturally as well as individually), you must journey into the betrayal of faith and the sabotage of hope. So while there are many ways to account for the rise of the New Atheism debate, my sense is that to really understand its energy and militancy it needs to be seen as the fallout from being forced to come to terms with “the shattering of dreams.” Which is why I think it’s helpful to place the debate against the backdrop of two cultural hypotheses—the “secularization thesis” and the “Christian century thesis”—theses that gripped the imaginations and fueled the hopes of the respective sides of the Secular-humanist and Christian-fundamentalist controversy in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet theses that are now shattering against the rocks of what the Templeton Prize-winning social philosopher, Charles Taylor, has described as our “post-secular” age.⁴ In fact, these theses are now suffering such a crisis of cultural plausibility (what Colbert might call “truthiness”), that continuing to hold to them looks to many like a case of white-knuckling, if not Freudian wish-fulfillment, in its own right.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. Yale Terry Lecture Series (Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

So in this corner we have the New Atheists—struggling to come to terms with the fact that religion did not go the way of the dodo, but is in fact back, if it ever left the building. And in this corner we have their doppelgangers, we'll call them “the New *Theists*,” struggling to come to terms with the fact that Christianity is increasingly holding less of the cultural limelight, particularly in light of Islam abroad, and the proliferation of ‘liquid-consumer-oriented’ spiritualities here at home. [And we could pause and talk here about the differences between John Caputo, James K. A. Smith, and Graham Ward on the promise and peril postmodern religion and what this means for progressive evangelicals.⁵] And this helps us understand why the God Debate flared up immediately on the heels of 9/11, which put an end to these triumphalistic cultural hopes (for Secular and Christian dominance, respectively), and therefore egg on the faces of those who held them. Blindsided by the rise of militant Islam, and the chastening of American power, both the New Atheists and the New Theists are struggling through a ‘standing eight-count’, attempting to steady their legs and regain their breath.

And as the “culture-industry” rings the bell, these two groups are fighting it out on the bookshelves, movie screens, news channels, talk shows, op-eds, blogs, and even our t-shirts and bumper stickers. And by “culture-industry” I mean what the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School have described as the way in which popular culture produces certain “goods” and manufactures certain “desires” that distract us from identifying and addressing the real sources of our discontent.⁶ So, according to their style of Marxism, it’s not *religion* that’s the “opiate of the masses,” but the *goods* of the culture industry (and we could talk about the usual suspects here, like *US Weekly*, Royal Weddings, and don’t you dare say *Jersey Shore* because it’s motivated me to work on my “back-abs”). And this should help us understand why the religious and political fronts of the culture wars have intensified in the midst of our economic crisis, functioning much like a case of societal dog kicking, displacing just enough anger (at a false object) that the status quo remains firmly in tact. We’ve perhaps never been so partisan, religiously and politically, and we have to ask, why now, what’s the motivation, who benefits, where’s the money trail, and where would our anger be better directed to achieve more substantive social change?

And while the dynamics of demonization between atheists and theists are often quite palpable, it also takes more low-grade passive-aggressive forms. Take the “car wars,” for example. First, came the *Ichthus*, the Christian fish (fine). Then came the Darwinian fish sprouting legs (touché). Then came the super-sized Christian fish (a clever allusion to Jonah’s whale) eating the Darwinian fish (well played). Then there was the even bigger Darwinian fish “mounting” the super-sized Christian fish. We await the next move. Now on one level this is quite amusing, at one point it was right up there with WWSD (or “what would Scooby-doo?”) a retort to WWJD, for my favorite bumper-sticker award. But I think if we were to pause and reflect together on the imagery of the “car wars,” with its allusions to sexual-domination and cannibalistic-violence, we would quickly conclude that, as with much of the culture wars, it’s not funny at all, but the

⁵ See John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). Conversations about these and other books in Baker Academic’s *Church and Postmodern Culture Series* can be found at www.churchandpomo.typepad.org.

⁶ See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2002 [1947]), particularly “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” pp. 120-167.

context from within which the most broken and impressionable members of society become mere “conduits,” acting out our cultural pathologies (and cultural violence) in very concrete ways.⁷

§2

God is Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Myself: Leavening a Cultural Conversation

If the God debate is appropriately described as a “death match,” then this book, from which the title of tonight’s lecture is drawn, is really an attempt to enter the debate *otherwise*, with a different wisdom than the “shock and awe” tactics of the culture warriors. And so I’d like to highlight three ways in which the book attempts to make a *redemptive intervention* into the “God debate.”

The first strategic intervention was to take “the New Atheism *debate*,” not just the New Atheism, as our subject matter. And not to declare a winner, but in order to disclose the way in which both sides often make strange bedfellows, being at each other’s throats by day, yet bedding down together at night in the same philosophical and political paradigms. As Terry Eagleton says, “Both parties agree pretty much on what religion consists in; it is just that Ditchkins rejects it while Pat Robertson and his unctuous crew grow fat on it.”

Philosophically, both sides are firmly rooted in the “Rationality tradition,” that Greek wisdom tradition that put its ultimate trust in Reason (and its partners in crime, Theory, Law, and Order). “In the God (of Reason) we trust,” as our own dollar bills say. More specifically, it’s the modern Enlightenment version of the Rationality tradition that both sides stand in, which helps explain their *scientific* and *apologetic* orientation, and their resistance (or in many cases, lack of awareness) of our “postmodern moment” and its various turns and critiques. So you have this attempt by both parties to “prove” (by logic or science) the existence or non-existence of God—something which I’m sure is causing both the atheist Nietzsche and the “Christian” Kierkegaard to role over in their graves. To put it in a Nietzschean register, in terms of their philosophical orientation, both sides are “rationalistic, all too rationalistic.”

And both sides also share a common political orientation as well, particularly with respect their views on Islam (which Charles Taylor has described as “Islamophobic”), and their “open-boarders” policy of securing American supremacy in the global economy. [And Naomi Klein would reminded us how catchwords like “relief,” “aid,” and “development” are often used as cloaks to “secure” that interest.⁸] As one commentator has suggested, the politics of both sides can be summed up in terms of “the idolatry of the nation-state, and the sacrificial violence of imperialism” in search of a future Market for Coca-Cola, Clorox, and asbestos (and I highlight asbestos, because Canada, the county in which I currently live, is the world’s largest exporter of asbestos products, even though man of those products are now illegal within its own borders).

⁷ For a similar account of the “possession” of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20 see Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 100-102.

⁸ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador, 2008).

So what I want to highlight is that philosophically and politically speaking at least, the New Atheism is neither all that “new” nor “radical,” and in fact, they’ve largely been a disappointment to the Radical Left. And no one expresses this more clearly than Eugene McCarragher, who laments Christopher Hitchens’ “dramatic conversion” after 9/11 from the “master of political analysis and moral commentary” during the Gulf War of ’91, to one who “promoted the Bush administration’s ‘war on terror’, and impugned the integrity of anyone who doubted the wisdom of the cause.”⁹ In Hitchens we witness the “volte face” from the scathing social critic at the magazine, *The Nation*, who once encouraged young dissidents-in-training to “do justice, and let the skies fall,” to the celebrity-pundit at *Vanity Fair* and on cable news. And so McCarragher wonders if it’s in Hitchens that we catch a glimpse of Nietzsche’s “last man,” one who withdraws from the sustained and rigorous engagement with the larger questions of the day, for the sake of indulging, as Nietzsche prophesied and feared, “their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night.” I’m being hard on Hitchens (and perhaps too hard), but it’s because he doesn’t often pick on people his own size, and I want you to see what happens when he bellies up with a left-wing, post-Marxist, radical Augustinian, socialist Christian, like McCarragher (who stands outside the boxes of both New Atheist and New Theist alike, for what it means to be a “Christian”).

The second strategic intervention I want to highlight is the attempt to draw both sides into dialogue with other atheism(s). There’s this popular misconception that all atheisms are created equal—that Democritus, Lucretius, Shelley, Hume, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno, Russell, Dawkins, and Hitchens all have each other’s backs (so to speak). And if you hear me saying anything tonight, then hear me calling this into question. In fact, one little known piece of Church history is that the Greek adjective *atheos* (meaning godless or impious) was first used as a pejorative term for the early Christians, who were viewed as being atheistic *with respect to*—and atheism often functions with this “with-respect-to-character.” In this case they were being atheistic *with respect to* the civil religion and social conventions of the Roman Empire. And I think we can learn a lot from them—what is it that we ought to be atheistic *with respect to*: what are the idols of our time...the gods of our age?¹⁰

So rather than atheism being monolithic, I want to suggest that it’s more helpful to speak in terms of a taxonomy of “atheism(s)” of which the “New” Atheism is but one species. Of course, we can talk more about any of these that interest you, and pardon me for being all too brief, but for the sake of time I just want put some other atheisms out on the table.

(1) The “atheism of suspicion” of Nietzsche, Freud, Marx—which was directed at false religion and bad faith.

(2) The “protest atheism” of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno—which distinguished between (and this is a distinction worth meditating upon) an “atheism for atheism’s sake” and an “atheism for God’s sake.”

⁹ Eugene McCarragher, “This Book Is Not Good.” A review of Christopher Hitchens’s *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. *Commonweal* magazine, June 15, 2007: www.commonwealmagazine.org/book-not-good-0

¹⁰ See Jon Stanley, “Why Every Christian Should ‘Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist’,” in *“God is Dead” and I Don’t Feel So Good Myself*, pp. 9-25.

(3) The “methodological atheism” of Martin Heidegger—which bracketed “God,” in order to keep the philosophical question of creation, or “why there is something rather than nothing,” genuinely open.

(4) The “Christian atheism” or of the radical theologians of the 60’s—which was a theological response to secularity and a world come of age.

(5) The “a/theism” of Jacques Derrida—which wants to honor the condition of religious, ontological, and ethical undecidability (which is basically a highly formal way of saying, ‘life is really hard, and there are no easy answers, and no easy decisions’.) [And no we don’t have time for this, but if any of you have mothers like I do, who love you even as they struggle to understand you, you’ll appreciate this quote by Derrida: “My religion about which nobody knows anything, any more than does my mother who asked other people a while ago, not daring to talk to me about it, if I still believed in God...but she must have known that the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of a voice doing anything than talking to me without saying anything.”¹¹]¹²

(6) And finally, yet most recently, the “ana-theism” of Richard Kearney—the prefix “ana,” which signals a back/forth and beyond movement, in this case, beyond both theism and atheism—which he describes as an attempt to return to God and religion after the rightful critiques of God and religion.¹³

So where does the New Atheism fall? Well, here’s the rub: in a sense, it doesn’t. And that’s not to give it a compliment, but to suggest that it lacks the bloody fingernails and tear-stained cheeks that some of the other atheisms do. For example, in light of what Theodor Adorno (one of the protest atheists) has referred to as his “damaged life”: his having been driven into exile by German fascism; his sense that to speak of any light in midst of the darkness of Auschwitz would be to trivialize both; and his willingness to face the horrific possibility that the truth of the holocaust was not that it was an accident of history or the fault of one bad man, but the logical outworking of industrial, bureaucratic, capitalistic society—a microcosm of modern society as whole—people reduced to commodities: farmed for hair, used as lab rats, burned as fuel. It’s in light of an atheist like Adorno, that I’m afraid the New Atheism begins to look rather pale, representing a certain “gentrification” of the atheistic critique. And I don’t say that as a “defensive Christian,” but as one who wants to defend the integrity of the other atheists, many of whom have been able to disclose the more hidden aspects of psychological, social, economic, political, and ecclesial domination by having the courage to dance where many Christians have feared to tread. So both sides of the debate would have much to gain from interacting with an

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 154-155.

¹² Leaning on the *apophatic* tradition of negative theology, Derrida has also spoken of a certain type of *theism* that “at times so resembles a profession of atheism as to be mistaken for it,” as well as a certain form of *atheism* that has “always testified to the most intense desire for God.” See Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood et al. (Stanford University Press, 1995), 35-36.

¹³ See Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

atheist of the caliber of Adorno, and in that sense I'm an evangelist—in wanting to introduce both sides to Friedrich, Karl, Theodore, Ernst, Max, and other good atheists like them.

Now, just as we can map the various atheisms, so can we map the various ways Christian thinkers have appropriated these atheisms. The story of Christian engagement isn't as monolithic as the New *Theists* would suggest either, and I just want to give one example that's been particularly important to me. And it's the way in which the "atheism of suspicion" (of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche) has been welcomed by the Reformed Christian philosopher, Merold Westphal, in his book *Suspicion and Faith: (and this is just one of those phenomenal subtitles) The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*. So after channeling Luther and Calvin in confessing: "I have probably never prayed to a God who wasn't an idol," Westphal proceeds to invite his fellow Christians to practice "atheism for lent," allowing the "masters of suspicion" to alert us to our tendency to "use" religion in ideological ways: seeking psychological consolation (Freud's insight), social domination (Marx's insight), and moral revenge (Nietzsche's insight). As Westphal suggests, (and this is just another one of those great quotes) "What if the biblical prophets, apostles, and Jesus himself were the *originators of suspicion* against the [false] piety of the people of God? What if Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are *plagiarists*, who should have footnoted their biblical sources? What if their critiques are all too true all too much of the time?"¹⁴ [This, I think, could be a litmus test for finding a church-community; when the pastor asks you what you're giving up for lent, tell them you're taking on atheism, and see what they say. I once told one I was taking up smoking in solidarity with the addicted, and from the look on his face, I knew it wasn't the place for me.]

The third strategic intervention I want to highlight is the attempt to clarify what Nietzsche meant by "the death of God."

To be a good reader of Nietzsche, the first thing we have to do is discern what type of claim he is making (that is, an onto-theological claim, a theological claim, a philosophical claim, an historical claim, etc., etc., etc.? An *onto-theological* claim would be something like, "a supreme being does not exist," which is what both sides of the debate typically assume he's saying. And if you're on *this* side you agree with him and then make him your poster-child, and if you're on *that* side you disagree with him and then spend millions of dollars poking fun at him on billboards. You've seen these: "Nietzsche is Dead. God." [And these billboards really piss me off, because I actually hope Nietzsche is, as the Psalms say, "alive with God," that he's been relieved of his suffering, and that I'll get to buy him a drink in some gritty side-street bar in the New Jerusalem and have him walk me through his books, starting with *The Gay Science*, where he first mentions "the death of God".] A *theological* claim, on the other hand, might be an interpretation of the meaning "God's death" in the death of Jesus, like Jürgen Moltmann's account of "the crucified God," or John Caputo's account of God's absolute kenosis in his book *The Weakness of God*.

I don't mean to suggest that Nietzsche believed in a supreme being (he didn't), or that he wouldn't be fascinated by Moltmann (I think he would), but I just don't think this is what he's getting at with the death of God. Rather, following Graham Ward, I think Nietzsche is using the

¹⁴ See Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Fordham University Press, 1998); and "Atheism for Lent," in *"God is Dead" and I Don't Feel So Good Myself*, pp. 67-78.

term “God” as a metonym (or a placeholder for something else), like when a news correspondent says, “the ‘White House’ made a statement today,” in which case they really mean something like, “the White House press secretary speaking on behalf of the American government under its current head of state, made a statement today.”¹⁵ Of course, this would be incredibly boring to hear all the time, so they just say, “the White House said today,” and we know what they mean, and they keep their jobs, and it’s all good. So I think Nietzsche is making both a *philosophical* claim and a *historical* claim, that is, when he talks about the death of “God” he is referring to “the death” of two other things—a “philosophical trajectory” and an “historical epoch” (like Joey from *Friends* said when Ross moved out, Nietzsche is signaling that it’s “the end of an era”).

Philosophically, he is referring to the end of the Rationality tradition and its “God”: absolute Reason, absolute Truth, absolute Goodness, and so on. And *historically*, he is referring to the end of the time-period characterized by a bourgeois Christian mentality: a Christianity which he referred to as nothing more than “Platonism for the masses”; and a dualistic moral framework of niceties and platitudes masking a decadence that said “above all, away with the body,” its pleasures, and its passions. How much of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity (as a life-negating pop-Platonism) still applies today I’ll leave to you. But I will say that both sides of the New Atheism debate fail to see the way in which Nietzsche’s critique applies to them, and how they deny the death(s) that Nietzsche announced. Yet, I would argue that we can pull the plug on these “gods,” which are no friend to either biblical religion or the kingdom of freedom, justice, solidarity, resourcefulness, and love it calls us to envision and work towards.

This should help us understand why, for Nietzsche, the death of God occasioned what he called, the “transvaluation of all value,” or the rethinking of what it means to be ethical in a time of cultural transition, when the old guides now lead us astray, like the morés of the nuclear family, the medicalization of birthing practices, and both the nonfat and Atkins diets (which we now know are simply slow suicides). For Nietzsche this began by embracing the values that the bourgeois mentality had suppressed (like vitality, power, and sensuality), and so we need not follow him all the way down the road to madness in order to hear the Word of God in words of this man, say: Be vital! Be powerful! Be sensual! In short, “Get a Life!” And so for Nietzsche, the “god” who died is the stale-fleshed, brittle-boned, cold-blooded “god” of Enlightenment Rationalism, whose death, perhaps, represents the liberation of, as Heidegger would say, “the God who can dance,” and thus the liberation of the mystery our true selves. In this view, our “not feeling so good” (to return to the subtitle of our book) is not a “sorrow unto Death,” but a “sorrow unto Life,” the fertile grounds for discerning what it means to live out of and into the fullness of life in all its livingness (biologically, artistically, economically, socially, politically, and ecclesiologically) in our particular time and place in history. This is, I suggest, what it means to preach Nietzsche today, and we need him preached today more than ever!

§3

Engaging with Modern Atheism on/at Mars Hill: A New Theological Agenda for Our Time

¹⁵ See Graham Ward, “Introduction, or a Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, *Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), pp. xv-xlvi.

In a recent article in the journal *First Things*, the Eastern Orthodox philosopher and theologian, David Bentley Hart confesses that he is coming to the conclusion that:

This whole ‘New Atheism’ movement is only a passing fad—not the cultural watershed its purveyors imagine it to be, but simply one of those occasional and inexplicable marketing vogues that inevitably go the way of pet rocks, disco, prime-time soaps, and *The Bridges of Madison County*. [This] latest trend in à la mode godlessness...has by now proved itself to be so intellectually and morally trivial that it has to be classified as just a form of light entertainment, and popular culture always tires of its diversions sooner or later and moves on to other, equally ephemeral toys.¹⁶

Although Hart’s quote resonates with some of the points I’ve been making—that it’s a product of the culture industry, that it’s a modern phenomena, and that it isn’t as rigorous as other atheisms—I hope you hear in my remarks a different spirit. As I would like to distinguish my own analysis from Hart’s by stepping back from critique, to that which should *found* any critique, and without which any critique would therefore be *unfounded*: and that’s a step back from critique to “gratitude.” In this case, gratitude for the New Atheists, and for what nails they hit squarely and firmly on the head in their critique of Christian faith.

The French Philosopher, Paul Ricouer, would commonly ask his students, “From where do you speak from?” “From where is it that you speak?” It’s funny what of your professors’ one-liners stay with you, but I speak as one who learned from someone in this room that “if God can speak through Balaam’s ass then he can speak through any ass among us.” And it’s here that I think we see the limits of being “counter-cultural” as an orienting-metaphor for cultural discernment, lest what we actually counter is the voice of God in the voice of the other (even if that other is bit of an ass). So I would like to signal a few ways in which I hear God speaking through the New Atheism, and relate these to my own work in the areas of “theology,” “ethics,” and “religion,” which I’ve outlined as a series of proposals to move beyond “Christian theism,” beyond “freedom-as-obedience,” and beyond “religion-as-dependence,” which I think are all crucial for moving beyond spiritual adolescence and into spiritual maturity. And let me just apologize beforehand that due to time these will have to be highly compressed, and so I offer them to you as an appetizer, to a future meal together.

(Proposal 1) Christian Scholarship Re-mixed: Beyond “Sophisticated Conservatism”

If we are invited to live in a Spirit that “blows where it wills,” to take our cue from one who “was not welcome in his hometown,” and to be faithful to a future that is “not yet,” then any theological proposal (to the atheistic critique or otherwise) runs the risk of having “no place to lay its head” among those who want to maintain the status quo by reducing the adventure of Christian thought to the monotony of ‘more of the same’. As there are pockets of what I have come to call “sophisticated conservatism” within Christian circles today—pockets of folks who

¹⁶ David B. Hart, “Believe It or Not,” *First Things*, May, 2010. Also available online at: www.firstthings.com/article/2010/04/believe-it-or-not

are smart enough to go tit-for-tat with their critics, who feel safe enough within institutions with large endowments, and who get enough strokes from the people who gobble up their material, that that they don't feel obliged to listen closely enough to the critiques of faith to either learn or say anything new. But if genuine engagement is marked by the degree of the mutual transformation that it engenders, then Christian thinking, which is always a "beautiful risk," will never be about opening franchises in tired theological cottage industries (lucrative though they may be). It's more entrepreneurial than that, which means it always runs the risk of erring (or "sinning boldly"), which might be troubling, if not for the fact that "there is no condemnation for those who 'error' in Christ Jesus." And this means there is the freedom to live life, which includes our theological life, without the fear that breeds defensiveness and the boredom of repetition. So before we even start talking about a theological response itself, it's important to say that a truly Christian response will be one that is in-spirited by love rather than fear. And that's something that I think even Bill Maher would say is not "religious," his term for ridiculous religion.

(Proposal 2) Theology Re-mixed: Beyond Theism to Covenantal Non-Theism

It seems to me that if you pay close attention to the "god" the New Atheists see in Christianity it looks very similar to the "god" of 18th century Enlightenment deism, the absentee landlord, which is only a stone's throw from atheism itself, as the absentee landlord (if any of you have had landlords) eventually becomes simply, "the absentee." And here I think they have rightfully identified a certain *deistic streak* within the Christian tradition as whole. The late evangelical theologian, Clark Pinnock, expresses this well when he says:

When [atheists] speak about the God whom they reject, I see little resemblance to the God of the Bible, though I do see a resemblance to the God of *conventional theism*. Atheism is, in part, an unpaid bill of the church, which has too often presented God as an alienating substance, remote, unsympathetic, and who exists at humanity's expense. Many of the difficulties with faith are due to problems inherent in conventional theism... The challenge of atheism... is best countered by a clearer vision of God's fair beauty, not by intellectual arguments.¹⁷

If, as Pinnock suggests, there is an implicit connection between "deism" and "conventional (or popular) theism," then I would suggest that what's called "biblical or Christian theism" is implicated as well, as it seems to me that deism always already haunts (or is inscribed within) any "theism," no matter how "conventional," "traditional," "classical," "Christian," or "biblical" it claims to be. It's for this reason that for Christian theology to truly repent of its deistic streak it must announce "the end of theism," which means both dropping the language of "Christian theism" from Christian discourse, and putting to rest the apologetic strategy (no offense to C. S. Lewis here) of viewing "theism" as a privileged stepping-stone to full-fledged Christian faith—a strategy that always fashions *Yahweh* (the God of the scriptures) in the image of *Theos* (the god of the philosophers).

¹⁷ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 2.

But if we are to part ways with “Christian theism,” then we must provide, as Pinnock so eloquently says, “a clearer vision of God’s fair beauty,” that is, an account of that which is beyond its borders and thus more faithful to the God of the scriptures. And such an account, which I refer to as “covenantal non-theism,” [not a sexy title, I’ll admit] would go a little something like this: It seems to me that if (1) God and Creation are covenantally co-related, that is, if God is always the-God-of-creation and Creation is always the-creation-of-God—even prior to what we mean by “the act of creation” itself (in the way that the poet, Leonard Cohen, suggests that we are related to our children even prior to their formal conception); and if (2) this bi-directional co-relation (this intimate mystery) between God and Creation deepens covenantally through time (like a good marriage), until eschatologically, as Jürgen Moltmann says, “God indwells Creation in a divine way, and Creation indwells God in a creaturely way,”¹⁸ or in the less sexual language of a Bishop like Tom Wright, “God’s space and Creation’s space dovetail”¹⁹—then I think we can say that theism, atheism, and pantheism all come into view as simultaneously insightful and misleading; each highlighting, yet idolizing, a particular moment of the God/Creation relationship that is more comprehensively, dynamically, and biblically described as “covenantal.”

So the “theist” may have latched onto the insight that in creation, the covenantal relation was *less intimate* than it will be in the eschaton (when God will be “all in all”), and therefore at times God feels “more distant” than others. And the “pantheist” may have latched onto the insight that in the eschaton, the covenantal relation will be *more intimate* than it was in the beginning of creation, and therefore at times God feels “more present” than others. And the “atheist” may have latched onto the insight that evil resists God’s presence, and therefore under conditions of radical evil and injustice God’s feels “altogether absent”—cue Psalm 80, from which Jesus drew to give voice to his own experience of Godforsakeness. The dance of divine presence and absence is far more complex than many of our theologies can handle, particularly when questions of evil come into the mix, and we need a theology that can keep time with them.

One benefit of this view that’s particularly relevant for progressive evangelicals is that it is both more *relational* and more *incarnational* than social trinitarianism, which is also an attempt to move beyond conventional theism, and which is probably the hottest thing going in progressive evangelical circles today.²⁰ It’s more relational because social trinitarianism remains unwilling to speak of the God/Creation relationship itself in fundamentally relational terms (reserving the language of *periochosis* for the intra-Trinitarian relations alone), and is therefore dependent upon notions of divine self-limitation to make space for creaturely freedom. However, if power and freedom are positively, rather than negatively correlated, that is, if true power empowers, as

¹⁸ See Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl, *The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁹ See N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), particularly “God,” pp. 55-70.

²⁰ For a more detailed account of the limits of social trinitarianism, see Jon Stanley, “Introduction: Beyond Obedience,” in *Freedom Unlimited: Liberty, Autonomy, and Response-ability in Clark Pinnock’s Open Theism*, by Jeffrey S. Hocking (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), xxiv: “[Social trinitarianism] fails to escape many of the problems of conventional theism by leaning on accounts of divine self-sufficiency that continue to position (a self-relational) God autonomously apart-from, and thus heteronomously over-against, creation. . . However, it only makes sense to speak of God as relational if what we are referring to is the way God is with creation and not simply the way God is with/in Godself prior to or apart-from creation.”

“power-with” rather than “power-over”²¹ (just as true authority authorizes, which should re-frame our understanding of the way in which sacred texts are authoritative²²), then divine power is creation’s empowerment, and vice versa, and self-limitation ceases to be a requirement for power-sharing, because, as with the twelve loaves of bread, what is shared expands as it’s shared. And it’s more incarnational, because if “Christian theology” is the discernment of *Emmanuel* (God-with-us, or God’s presence in creation) rather than the science of *Theos* (God-as-such, or God apart from creation), then we need a theology can handle the radically incarnational notion that, in principle, *God can be (and one day will be) with-us in as many ways as creation ‘is’*—that is, present “in terms of” any creature, aspect, or relationship within creation without making an idol of any one way (present in/as Jesus of Nazareth, Julie of Toronto, your kind faces, this warm coffee, my relationship with my children along its entire life-cycle).

To put it more personally, I’m currently in the space of exploring what it means to hear God pray to me (like he did with Abraham) and feel God believe in me (like he did with Moses), even as I struggle to pray to and believe in God (as Jesus did in Gethsemane), as well as exploring what it means to simultaneously experience “being” God/as-father to my children and experience “receiving” God/as-child in my children; of changing God’s diaper and playing peek-a-boo with God. And one day when I am old and unable to contain my bladder, the relationship will flip, and I will experience “being” God/as-child to my adult children and experience “receiving” God/as-parent in my adult children. So part of why I want to go beyond theism (which always idolizes God as the father of an adolescent child) is because I believe in a God who desires to become enfleshed in every square inch of creation (to become “all in all,” as Paul says), and that includes your flesh as well as my flesh. So the all-important question is not whether or not we should “play God,” of course we should (as this is very confessional meaning of what it means to be made in God’s image and thus to image the God of history in history), but what it means to “play God” well.²³

(Proposal 3) Ethics Re-mixed: Beyond Obedience to Freedom

²¹ For a discussion of oppositional (power-over) and non-oppositional (power-with) accounts of difference see James H. Olthuis, “Face-to-Face: Ethical Asymmetry of the Symmetry of Mutuality?” in *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*, James K. A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), pp. 135-156.

²² For an account of biblical authority as authorization (or empowerment) see Hendrik Hart, *Setting Our Sights By the Morning Star: Reflections on the Role of the Bible in Post-Modern Times* (Toronto, ON: Patmos, 1989).

²³ I haven’t highlighted the connection between “playing God” and the “call to suffer on behalf of another” in this lecture, only because the theme of suffering on behalf of another is already so prevalent in the theology at Mars Hill. But this connection could easily be made (and deepened) with the help of Jürgen Moltmann’s gloss on Paul’s account of Holy Saturday, in which Jesus takes God’s presence into the Godforsaken space of Hell itself. In this way, we could say that the gift/call of playing God in creation takes the form of suffering on behalf of another under conditions of injustice/oppression. Here we are on the threshold of a robust public theology and theology of mission in which Jesus’ followers “fulfill the sufferings of Christ” by playing God in the forsaken places, and thus participating in God coming to “fully fill all things in every way.” To point up the connection between anthropology and Christology in this light, after the fall the gift/call of being “created co-creators” takes the form of being “redeemed co-redeemers.” Thus when N. T. Wright speaks of Jesus taking up the messianic vocation “as doing and being for Israel and for the world what only God could do and be” I think of this in terms of Jesus “playing God.” I simply want to extend this vocation to Jesus’ followers as well (to those who will do “even greater things than these”), as those gifted/called to *continue* to do and be for the world what only God can do and be.

If we listen closely to the New Atheism we'll also learn that related to the problem of speaking of *biblical religion* in terms of "theism" is the problem of speaking of *biblical freedom* in terms of "obedience," which comes across as authoritarian, patriarchal, and hierarchical. The liberation and eco-theologian, Leonardo Boff, summarizes this well:

[In much of ordinary theism] God is the supreme authority of the universe, from who all other...authorities derive, in descending order of hierarchy...a single political leader, military chief, social leader, religious head...and so on... Much of the atheism of...today is...a denial of this sort of authoritarian God and of the...sort of religion...that obstructs the development of human freedoms.²⁴

One of the challenges in our time, I believe, is to articulate a view of freedom that is neither characterized by *autonomy* nor *heteronomy*,²⁵ a distinction that comes down to two related questions: who gives me the law—"myself" (*auto*) or an "other" (*heter*)? And thus, where do I find my life—"above" the law (in autonomy) or "under" the law (in heteronomy)? And while we could talk about how this binary comes to expression in both the philosophical and theological traditions (in terms of the distinctions between "negative" freedom and "positive" freedom, and the spiritualities of "choice" and spiritualities of "obedience," respectively), and how I think we need to go beyond autonomy and heteronomy altogether, I want to pick-on the one that I think is most representative of the Christian tradition as a whole, and that the most perceptive of the atheistic critiques rightly rail against—a view that I have come to refer to as "soft-heteronomy," which still speaks of freedom in terms of obedience, but construes such obedience as being "for our own good" and therefore as inviting our "willing submission."²⁶ I've come to refer to this as "eat-your-vegetables-because-they're-good-for-you-theology," which might (and I mean might) have its place when you're seven, but would be really awkward to hear from your mother at a dinner party on your 35th birthday (not that I'm speaking from experience). The main point here is that just as soft-porn is still porn, soft-heteronomy is still heteronomy, and so remains within a *spirituality of obedience* that isn't able to do justice to the messianic freedom we see in Jesus, for whom "doing God's will" was not about "obeying" a divine law, plan, or script, but about creatively making God present in his own discernment and willing.²⁷

²⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 169.

²⁵ For a more detailed account of how truly moving beyond the binary of autonomy and heteronomy is also to move beyond both atheism and theism, open theism and classical theism, Arminianism and Calvinism, and the various spiritualities of choice and obedience, see Jon Stanley, "Introduction: Beyond Obedience," in *Freedom Unlimited: Liberty, Autonomy, and Response-ability in Clark Pinnock's Open Theism*, pp. xvii-xxvii.

²⁶ I'm casting a broad net here, but to me, Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth are representative of soft-heteronomy in the theological tradition (Barth having spoken of freedom as "the God-given ability to obey," *The Humanity of God*, 82), and Buber, Levinas, and Derrida are representative of soft-heteronomy in the philosophical tradition. At issue for both traditions is whether *theological* difference (or the divine/creaturely relation) and *ontological* difference (or the self/other relation) is conceived oppositionally/asymmetrically or non-oppositionally/symmetrically. While I would certainly acknowledge that freedom is God-given, such that to cut ourselves off from God would be cut ourselves off from the source of freedom itself, I want to name the depth-meaning of "the gift of freedom" in the confessional (or faith) discourse of blessing/participation rather than in the juridical (or legal) discourse of law/obedience, which is not without merit, but fails to name the "heart" of the spirituality of existence.

²⁷ Heteronymous accounts of what it means to follow God's will often draw upon Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane ("not my will but thy will be done"), reading it as an example of Jesus submitting his (internal) desire to God's (external) desire. Such a reading is problematic on a number of levels (i.e., historically, anthropologically, Christologically, and theologically), not least because it assumes an unorthodox Christology in which the Son is "subordinate" to the Father (thus falling into the heresy of subordinationism by making Jesus less than co-equal with the father). I find it

So if we return to thinking about the God/Creature relationship in terms of the life-cycle of the parent/child relation, then soft-heteronomies and the *spiritualities of obedience* they produce remain stuck in a particular stage of development, that of an adolescent child obeying the law of the father (No wonder Freud and Lacan had such trouble with Christianity). So it seems to me that even the softest forms of heteronomy run the risk of underwriting a form of spiritual immaturity that is content to remain being God's adolescent children rather than growing up into the responsibility of being God's mature partners. I'm always suspicious of people and faith communities for whom the language of "obedience" is central, and that's only because I take Jesus at his word when he said, "I no longer call you servants...Instead, I have called you friends" (John 15:15). That Jesus calls his disciples servants "no longer" implies that there was a time when the servant/master relationship was appropriate. But now that his disciples "will do even greater things than these" (14:12), "may ask anything in [his] name" (16:26), and actively shape God's will—the time for the servant/master (and parent/child) relationship is finished. Spiritualities of obedience, like "spiritual milk" (1 Pet 2:2), are fitting for a time, but we must not remain fixated with them, as there comes a time when each of us are invited to go beyond obedience.

(Proposal 4) Religion Re-mixed: Beyond Dependence to Participation

As I've already suggested, going beyond autonomy or heteronomy (disobedience or obedience, independence of dependence)—living neither above nor below the law—it requires finding our life in that which precedes and exceeds law, which takes us right back to the first word of Genesis. "In the beginning was...the Word," says John, glossing Genesis 1:1, but what's the character this Word? If it were a wine, what would it taste like? If it were a musical note, what would it sound like? If it were a kiss, what would it feel like? That's what we're talking about here; and everyone's staked their claim. For Abraham Heschel, "in the beginning was the *command*"²⁸; for Martin Buber, "in the beginning was the *relation*"; for Jacques Derrida, "in the beginning was the *telephone*"; for Julia Kristeva, "in the beginning was *love*." Yet (with perhaps the exception of Kristeva) I would interpret this "Word" otherwise. As God's first Word to/for creation (the "Let there be" of Gen 1:3) is in the *jussive* rather than the *imperative* tense, being more like a divine benediction than a divine command, more like an Irish Blessing than a German Law. So here's my humble proposal: "In the beginning was the blessing!" The Word of Life comes to us in terms of a blessing rather a law, and blessings do not demand our obedience and require our subjection (it would be an odd blessing that did) as much as they authorize, energize, and empower our participation. Of course humans can turn a blessing into a law, as even the softest forms of heteronomy do, but that would be to close down the covenantal

more helpful to read this text not as a "test of obedience" but as a "call to discernment." In other words, Jesus' struggle to *do* God's will was a question both of discerning (with God) which of his own competing desires would actually make God present (or allow for God to become all in all), and of having the faith and hope to follow through with that risky conclusion, which in this case, entailed rejecting both the revolutionary way of the Zealots and the quietist way of the Essenes (as so many would-be messiahs had done before) and taking up the "doubly-revolutionary" (Wright's term) way of the cross, Jesus' understanding (worked out in prayer, study, and spiritual struggle) of the true messianic vocation.

²⁸ Abraham Heschel: "My being is *obeying* the saying 'Let there be!'... What Adam first hears is *command*." *Who Is Man?* (Stanford University Press, 1965), 97. [My emphasis].

dynamics of existence, as life in its fullest sense is not a function of our orientation to law (whether above or below) but of the extent of to which we receive, participate with/in, and extend God's blessing.

And it's around this term "participation" that I would like to re-center the very meaning of the term "religion," which in both its etymology (from *religare* or "bind back") and its use (think of Schleiermacher's "absolute dependence" here) has strong connotations of dependence and subjection. And, of course, this re-centering of the meaning of religion would have to be worked out both systematically and biblically. Systematically, we can say this: if both God and Creation covenantally (or mutually) "bind back" to each other through Wisdom—rather than Creation alone "binding back," and therefore being both dependent upon and subject to, a God who is absolute—then we can talk about religion in terms of "covenantal participation." And biblically, as Nik Ansell suggests, we can say this: "the intertextual echoes between Ephesians 1:23 (in which God is said to "fill all things in every way" becoming "all in all") and Genesis 1:28 (in which humanity is authorized to "fill the earth"), suggests that "the human 'filling' of creation, when pursued in covenant with God, thus results in God 'filling' the world with God's presence."²⁹ Along these lines, imaging the God of history in history could be thought of in terms of covenantally participating in God becoming "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28)—that is, for those creatures made in both "the image of God and the image of Creation," religion is about bringing God and Creation to their divine and creaturely fulfillments.

Much of what I've been suggesting about the way in which the problems with Christian theism, freedom-as-obedience, and religion-as-dependence, all hang together, can be glimpsed in the difference between Slavoj Zizek (the snarky Slovenian Atheist philosopher) and Dostoyevsky (the beloved Russian Christian novelist) on what's at issue in the death of God.³⁰ And here I find more of an ally in Zizek than Dostoyevsky.

It was Augustine who said that if you want to know who someone really is, then ask him or her what they love? You can also tell a lot about a person if you know what they fear, and you can tell a lot about a person's practical theology if you know what they would fear if indeed their God was dead. So let's pose this question to Zizek and Dostoyevsky: If God is dead, what is there to fear?

Perhaps the best-known line from Dostoyevsky's works is: "if God is dead, then everything is permitted." What does this tell us about his practical theology? His God is primarily a law-giver, the legitimator of a moral order, the one who reveals what is not permissible in his universe—a view of God that I call "God-in-the-negative."

And what of Zizek? In his *New York Times* editorial entitled "*Atheism is a Legacy Worth Fighting For*,"³¹ Zizek questioned the logic of Dostoyevsky's statement, pointing out that quite

²⁹ Nik Ansell, "It's About Time: Opening Our Reformational Paradigm to the Eschaton," *Calvin Theological Journal*, forthcoming.

³⁰ I am leaning heavily upon D. Stephen Long's very helpful discussion of Zizek and Dostoyevsky in his "Foreword: Atheism's Resurgence and Christian Responses," in "*God is Dead*" and *I Don't Feel So Good Myself*, xiii-xxi.

³¹ Slavoj Zizek, "Atheism is a Legacy Worth Fighting For," *New York Times*, Op-ed, March 12, 2006. Also available online at: www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/opinion/13iht-edzizek.html?_r=1

often it has been those who profess faith in God who have been the source of moral atrocities— atrocities in which “God’s law” gave permission for abandoning even the slightest bit of human decency. But even more interesting is the way Zizek questions the logic of Dostoyevsky’s statement in an earlier piece of writing sub-titled (and catch this) “the *Christianity* Legacy is Worth Fighting For,”³² in which he suggests that if God were dead then there would be too much law and morality for our own good, as is the case, he suggests, in our present consumer-capitalist context, where we are much less free than we think, and than the advertisers tell us.

In this way, God’s death wouldn’t open Life up too much, thus permitting everything, but cause Life to close down (or in Luther’s terms “close in on itself”), permitting far too little. To live in a God-less world, a world without God’s blessing—that is, a world not continually grounded in God’s gifting and continually opened by God’s promising—wouldn’t make us too free, but not free enough, reducing us to slaves (to the laws of the market perhaps). But, once again, the God of the scriptures blesses creation into being by saying “Let there be,” invites us to participate in the creative project by saying, “Let *us* create,” and tells us that we are not to be slaves, servants, or even children, but as “God’s mature friends,”³³ who actively and creatively participate in God coming to “fill all things in every way.” It’s such a view of “God-in-the-positive” that would speak to the concerns of those Atheists that are also onto the very biblical wisdom (sadly obscured in much Christian theology) that “true love” casts out fear, that “true freedom” is unlimited, that “true power” empowers, and that “true religion” is not about dependence (or even interdependence) but about participation and be(com)ing³⁴ mature friends with God. And here’s the punch line: with respect to the atheistic critique, this is an account of religion that’s more like a shot of Seattle espresso (or as Jürgen Moltmann says, “a cup of coffee for the present”) than an opiate.

Instead of a Conclusion: An Open Ending

I would like to conclude in the same way that we concluded our book, and that is, quite inconclusively—as we placed poems at the beginning and ending of our book in order to create an open-ended book. Yet rather than reading one of the poems from our book (in part because I want you to buy it), I would like to read you a ‘60-Second Sermon’ by Nik Ansell, entitled (and no I’m not lisping) “Faithing the Truth,” (you still think I’m lisping) which was originally presented on BBC TV’s *First Light* program, airing on Sunday mornings to serve a crowd of listeners who are “spiritually interested,” but who wouldn’t be caught dead in a church. Nik will also tell you the piece is a mediation upon Jesus’ words, “Thy will be done on earth as in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

³² Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London, UK: Verso, 2000).

³³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God’s Future for Humanity and the Earth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 25.

³⁴ The Reformational tradition of philosophy has always maintained that the ontological distinction between structure (being) and genesis (becoming) are correlates or co-related features of creaturely existence. For this reason, the Reformational Christian philosopher James H. Olthuis speaks of human existence in terms of “be(com)ing,” see “Be(com)ing Humankind as Gift and Call,” *Philosophia Reformata* 58 (1993): 153-172.

- 1.1 Atheists claim that there is no God.
I think they're right.
If all we can see in the world is injustice, despair and boredom, we're living
in a world where God doesn't exist.
Atheists are simply facing reality.
Religion is wishful thinking.
- 1.2 But I'm not an atheist.
I don't just want to face reality; I want to change it.
It's up to us whether God exists or not.
If we live out God's justice and mercy, God becomes real.
Then the world of the atheist has to make way for another world; a world of compassion,
hope and excitement.
The kingdom of God.
- 1.3 True religion is not wishful thinking.
It's all about bringing God into existence.

Thank you very much for your presence and your interested faces. I look forward to continuing the conversation with Brian and Roy and in our Question and Response time.