

# **Godtalk within the Humanist Institute-and out in the world**

February 13, 1998  
Bob Tapp to members of class 8

Letters from Paul LaClair and Nash Boutros stimulated this didactic memo. Especially since several (too many) missed the December meeting where this was a recurrent topic. To me it is imperative that we distinguish two quite separate contexts in which godtalk occurs.

## **I Within the classes of the Institute**

The humanism that was shared by the founders of NACH and the Institute was clearly and explicitly nontheistic. I remind you that the 1984 gathering was of individuals, not organizations. Whatever might be true of godtalk within the AEU or UU A, it was not present at the Chicago founding session.

In a few cases, students have enrolled in the Institute and defended some variant of godtalk. No conversions have occurred, (to my knowledge); many discussions have been unnecessarily sidetracked, and the majority of students have felt such excursions were non-productive.

Students need to be or become conversant with the main varieties of godtalk, historical as well as contemporary, Western and non-Western. But this is another matter. If you ask me why, my main answer would be that unearned atheism is insufficient in a humanist leader. We need to know the "best that has been thought and said" for and against the varied gods of the human past. And we also need to study the varied ways in which ordinary people engage in godtalk.

My reason here is that we often will be playing therapeutic roles with persons who have left some tradition and are exploring ours. They will want to know how our tradition(s) outgrew their theisms, and whether such nontheism is still intellectually defensible. Let them engage with the famous "university discussion" and wrestle with Antony Flew and the others over John Wisdom's famous garden, and over whether a god always dies "the death of a thousand qualifications." Let them also wrestle with Alvin Plantinga's quite lonely attempt to make theism philosophically defensible. And yes, let them look at the Tipler's who try to make physics some proof of theism. And read the cleverly-written but muddled apologetics of a C. S. Lewis.

On the more constructive side of things, help them weight the theistic critiques of a Julian Huxley, a Bertrand Russell, a Paul Kurtz, a Sidney Hook, a John Dewey, a John Dietrich, a Herbert Schneider, a Joseph Blau, a Corliss Lamont.

Should a humanist leader be equipped to perform such therapies? Absolutely! Can the Institute build all this into its curriculum? Alas, no. But we can help students move along in these directions.

Along with this therapeutic role, our graduates should be making scholarly critiques of new forms of contemporary godtalk. This means an ongoing life of intellectual and philosophical inquiry.

## II In normal life, i.e. in our varied organizations and with our fellow citizens.

Start out by remembering that 97% of our US neighbors believe in "God." Calling them stupid or naive would be rude, arrogant, and a sure relationship-breaker. (Too many of us indulge in this false luxury too much of the time). How much better, whenever serious discussion is possible, to explore what **kind** of a god-and with what **implications**.

Modern gods run a gamut from the anthropomorphic god of Christian fundamentalists to the metaphysical "ground of Being" of the Tillichian existentialists. Let me try a chronological outline.

1. gods of natural phenomena (lightening, sun, water, etc). What Max MULLER called language mistakes (sun becomes Sun, etc).
2. euhemeristic gods. Divinized heroes (Dionysius, Augustus).
3. anthropomorphic gods. Greater than humans, usually immortal, often inscrutable-"My ways are not your ways". (Zeus, Jahweh, Krishna).
4. Universalized principles. cf. *Dike* (Greece: justice), *len* (China: rightness).
5. Universal Reason (cf. Stoic's *Logos*).
6. Absolute beings outside time and space. (Plato, "the One").
7. Rabbinic Judaism's, god of history, to be understood by dialectic.
8. Philo's allegorized Jahweh
9. Paradoxical and contradictory beings (Tertullian's Christian god).
10. Beings superior to, and morally different from us (Augustine's god).
11. Knowable by reason apart from experience (Anselm's god).
12. Reasonable and philosophically knowable (in part at least). Averroes' Muslim god, Maimonides' Jewish god, Aquinas' Christian god).[all based on Aristotle].
13. Radical mysticism's god (Eckhart's "das Nicht").
14. Luther's arbitrarily gracious and essentially unknowable god (shades of Scotus and Augustine and Paul).
15. Calvin's legalistic and moralistic god.
16. Kepler's mathematical god.
17. Spinoza's pantheistic vision ("deus sive natura").
18. The Cambridge Platonists' latitudinarianism ("the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord").
19. Deism's creator and absentee moral-lawgiver god.
20. Kant's "religion within the limits of reason alone," rejecting theisms and centering on morality which was universally understandable, without any "revelation."
21. God as the absolute being on which we are dependant, a "feeling" proof of Schleiermacher.
22. The post-eschatological god of Protestant liberalism (God has now no hands but yours to build his Kingdom on earth).
23. The equating of god with the evolutionary process, understood in some teleological (design) way ("Some call it Nature, others call it God).
24. God known through a "supernatural" experience (evangelical and later fundamentalist Protestantism).
25. God as "Wholly Other," knowing us but unknown by us. Luther, Kierkegaard, Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr.
26. God as finite, growing and suffering with his creation (E.S. Brightman, Peter Bertocci).
27. God as Process (Whitehead and his followers).
28. God as "creative event" (H. N. Wieman).

My list is by no means exhaustive. But it surely shows the enormous variety of gods in the Western tradition, **and** their mutual incompatibilities. Let us by all means honor the dignity and good faith of our theistic neighbor and try to understand what particular variety of theism is being professed. Rather than play some kind of historical oneupmanship (which is usually unnecessary as well as difficult), why not try to fit things along a contemporary spectrum:

- Pantheism: "god" means everything, nature is all
- Evolutionism: "god" is both guiding and evolving with nature
- Mysticism: "god" is the best name for that which can be experienced but not well described or known
- Roman Catholic blending of a god known partly by reason and partly by revelation, authoritatively interpreted
- Liberal Protestantism: "god" is a force working cooperatively with humans for righteousness
- Reform Judaism's god as primarily ethical
- Liberation theology's vision of a god perceptible only through struggles for justice
- Conservative Protestantism: "god" is best known through the Bible, and is a superhuman and supernatural being whose ways are mandatory upon us although we are often unable to understand or "approve" them
- Fundamentalist Protestantism: "god" is fully and infallibly revealed in the Bible; and outside this, human reason and science have nothing to add

PLUS a number of more recent and presently smaller forays:

- Paganism: gods may not be "real" but are psychologically and sociopolitically useful
- Goddess: revived by some feminists and picked up by some UUs. Rituals and consciousness-raising without strong philosophical or historical grounding
- UU-Buddhist: now a subgroup with a web presence
- UU Christian: Jesus as closest to some perfect divinity (now a minority position)
- Universal Religion: Claim that there is something uniting all religions (usually some mystical apprehension, but sometimes ethics).
- Gaia: a claim by some "deep ecologists" that earth IS a living organism
- Quantum: a leap from one aspect of contemporary physics into theological speculations
- Postmodernism: everything is opinion anyway, so why not believe in some god
- Story as god: Andrew Greeley's current position, Santayana's "there is no god, and Mary is his mother."
- New Age: religions are not helpful but spirituality is-including crystals, angels, healing touch, alternative healings and medications, etc.
- Native American spirituality: A synthetic construct of outsiders failing to recognize variety and differences in tribal religions.

My suggestion is that people still wedded to godtalk be invited (not challenged) to become more specific about just what they do and do not intend by such language.

### **III. the implications of various godtalks**

A. On the self-image level. Most of the classical forms of godtalk stress the dependence of the self upon some greater intelligence, and the insignificance of earthly existence except as some kind of interim before an otherworldly and eternal kind of existence. The "body" is almost always less than the soul/spirit self, and is usually seen as detrimental to the real pilgrimage. Think of religious hymn-lines. Such poetry is often a superb (and neglected by scholars) gold mine of beliefs, meanings, and sentiments.

Oh, this world is not my home  
 When the saints go marching home  
 The heathen, in his blindness, bows down to wood and stone  
 Mould me and make me, after Thy will  
 Would he devote that sacred head! For such a worm as I  
 Have Thine own way, Lord  
 Down in the human heart! Crush'd by the tempter  
 All my gains I count but loss  
 Prostrate, dear Jesus, at thy feet/ A guilty rebel lies  
 Love [divine, of course] lifted me  
 Lord, Thy love at last has conquered! "*~None* of self, and *all* of Thee"  
 I want to be like a little child  
 Lead kindly light, 'mid the encircling gloom  
 He's everything I need  
 Amazing grace, that saved a wretch like me

If humanism is the encouragement of a healthy psychophysical nondualistic self, growing in autonomy and agency, the implications of godtalk on this level are clearly pathological. If modern humanism stresses human responsibility (based upon scientific understanding) for the evolutionary process-in both biological and social senses, this level of godtalk is clearly an undercut. If modern humanism strives for a universal creation/recognition of human rights-as well as an emerging corpus of international and national law undergirding a growing consensus on justice-as well as a rational ecology that balances human needs with the non-human environment-then popular religious sensibility is of negligible value. Some theologians, let it be noted, would agree with most of my conditionals here. But they have had poor track records in having their ideas, and interpretations lastingly implemented. There is a Gresham's Law also operative in religions whereby the "bad" drives out the "good."

B. At the societal level. Here too the multifarious nature/implications/correlates of godtalk are evident. Some examples:

1. Violence: Pacifism, just wars, my country right-or-wrong all have their defenders.
2. Economics: Capitalism, socialism, welfareism, communitarianism, communeism, objectivism, libertarianism--each has been seen as correct/required by some variant of godtalk.
3. Sexuality: Usually repressed and/or constrained, but in a few instances reversed into "free love."
4. Politics: Avoided by Amish, submitted to by Lutherans, reordered by Calvinists
5. Family and children: Avoided by celibacy, welcomed by Lutherans, limited by liberal Protestants.
6. Poverty: Welcomed by some religious orders, seen as god's judgment by many, seen as unnecessary evil by a few in recent times.
7. Learning and knowledge: Worldly temptations to be shunned, or ways of "thinking god's thoughts after him.
8. Evil: The lot of "fallen humans," or an everpresent possibility to be avoided.
9. Science: Wrong if non-biblical, or a legitimate use of intellect.
10. Emotions and feelings: The route to desired religious experiences, or as "enthusiasms" inevitably leading to heresies.
11. The devil: All too real, an error for monotheistic religion, a handy excuse for moral failures.
12. Progress: A rejection of Armageddon, a building of the divine kingdom, a fantasy of human pride.

13. Love. A divine command, or a worldly turning away from the god.
14. Power.: A dangerous adaptation to this world, or a necessity for either stability or change.
15. Disease. Caused by demons, part of god's judgment, or something to be understood and overcome.
16. Races: Made by the creator, or false human constructs denying that humans are all children of the same god.
17. Genders. Central to the divine creation plan or important only on the lowly plane of physical bodies.
18. Other religions: False gods and false prophets, or multiple paths up the same mountain.
19. Soul: Inevitably linked to a body (whether "physical" or "spiritual"), or an entity higher than body and separable from it at death.
20. Play (fun and games): Reserved to the god and thus frivolous for humans, or a valid modality in a larger life.
21. Beauty: A distraction from the truly spiritual, or a prime result of human creativity.

## Conclusion

My listing of important human areas and interests is only a starter, but note that in each one the historical and contemporary godtalks of Euroamerican culture bear multiple and contradictory implications. The nontheistic stance of the humanist in itself will not give specific implications but it will at least clear the decks of competing confusions. When these confusions are clearly seen, the authorities on which they rest (bibles, creeds, religious leaders, revelational experiences, historical traditions) begin to lose their power. At that point, what to us are superb ways of dealing with problems (reason, common sense combined with skepticism, science) will begin to appear to chastened godtalkers as all that is left to deal with real human problems. We can then, as equal brothers and sisters, engage in fruitful dialogue and construct more humane futures for all.

**Summarizing.** Within the classes of the Institute we should be reevaluating various theistic claims with utmost rigor. Our critiques need to be current, comprehensive, and philosophically and humanly compelling. Outside the Institute, we need to remember that bashing the religions of those who haven't yet grown to the questioning stage is seldom effective, as well as discourteous. More importantly, we need to be articulating on many more communication levels those positive blueprints drawn from our humanism that promise better persons in better societies.

My recommendation, of course, presupposes a free society in which various religions and humanisms can jostle, and none can dictate. Take as a paradigm the success of family planning in this century just ending. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, nonbelievers have come to have similar values for their children and have availed themselves of birth control technologies to implement these values. The requisite theological adjustments come later, but they will come. The positive valuation now accorded human sexuality is the main issue here. Given social freedom, human experience readily discovers this.