

# Nontheistic Humanists In A Culture of God-Speak

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EVERYONE SPEAKS about God. Even when we do not think about God, or seriously believe in such a being or power, we engage in God-speak. Allusions to God are embedded in our language, like conglomerate matter cemented in bedrock. Even the staunchest atheist unselfconsciously calls out, "Good-bye" - modern English for *God bJ-rye*, derived from *God be wi' ye*.

The doughty iconoclast who heartily intones "Good-bye," may nevertheless risk obloquy or summary punishment by refusing to take an oath ending with "So help me God!" Oath taking is a more serious matter, involving a more exacting standard of intellectual honesty than a conventionalized farewell. Yet, another individual, equally resistant to the presumptions of piety and orthodoxy, will shrug off the so-help-me-God of the judicial oath as having as little substance as the divine remnant concealed in a cheery *adios*. The theistic appendage of the oath has become a matter of form, a ceremonial relic, he will argue, having too slight a meaning to contest. Even the courts seem to have fallen back to this position, declining to

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rule against the use of God's name on coins, or to halt the depiction of religious art on postage stamps, on the ground that the violation of constitutional principle, if any, is *de minimus* - in the Latin, *a trifle!* The law, say the learned judges, does not take account of trifles.

The name of God become a trifle? It would scandalize devout believers to think it has become so, yet serious theologians are among those who recognize the debasement of religious concepts in their mindless overuse. We have it on the authority of our distinguished judiciary that under certain circumstances - when no one is at risk for passing the deific currency unsupported by the pure bullion of belief - invoking God has become a mere glyptic flourish, an ornament, more akin to a regal *gesundheit* than a godly invocation. If skeptics feel they are being co-opted by such reasoning, the sincerely orthodox have even greater reason to worry. God is becoming a mix of ornament and hyperbole.

Gresham's law operates in God-speak too, the debased coinage driving out the good. The ancient Hebrew, proscribing use of the Divine Name except by the high priest on restricted occasions, foresaw this de-nouement. The old rabbis understood the terminal product of using the sacred name "vainly." The abuse would result in the most dreaded sin the pious monotheist could contemplate: idolatry, the counterfeiting of the divine Image, the defiling imitation of the holy Presence.

The zealots of "civic religion" have overreached. They have reduced piety to a mannerism and made talk about God a trifle. God-talk, a term recently much in vogue among theologians, designates the various ways in which people write and talk about God, presumably a serious subject of discourse. But earnest God-talk verges off into unreflective God-speak - a patois which is not honest talk about God at all, but only verbiage in which the deity lies congealed like an insect in amber. God-speak is the vestige, imbedded in linguistic etiquette, of three thousand years of abusing the Third Commandment. The Christian Church seems never to have grasped the issue at all - having shrunk the commandment to a ban on profanity! Don't curse. Twaddleize God.

The primary result of this "sin" of the sanctimonious however uncomfortable it may occasionally make Humanists and other nontheists - has been to render allusions to God in common speech and civic ceremony as insubstantial as the swirling pantheon of painted gods and goddesses that adorns the ceiling of the Capital Dome in Washington. God made decorative, God made ceremonious and unctuous, is not the God of Moses and Micah. Nor is this domestic theomorph the God of Jesus of Nazareth, that

arch-enemy of religious formalism who forbade his disciples to pray publicly and ridiculed those who displayed their piety on street corners. Oaths made in the divine Name he prohibited entirely, for which multitudes of Quakers and other pietists were whipped, disfigured, imprisoned, and sometimes hanged.

In our own lifetime, thousands of Jehovah's Witness children were expelled from school for refusing to violate the Second Commandment - as they saw it - by the idolatrous act of saluting the flag. It was the need to stop this travesty against conscience that induced the Supreme Court in 1943 to ban the compulsory salute. Still, Jehovah's Witnesses have continued to suffer physical violence and ostracism. Since the Eisenhower administration, when the phrase, "under God," was added to the flag salute, no strictly observant Jew has been able to obey both ancient religious law *and* patriotic convention - unless one can learn to pronounce "G-d," the way the scrupulous rebbe writes it, cartwheeling over the unnameable Name.

So nontheistic Humanists and other skeptics are not the only victims of our society's vacuous but coercive religiosity. On the contrary, nontheists - using that term to embrace all who do not accept the doctrine of God's existence and nature in more or less classic terms - are ultimately offered release by the final fracturing of God-speak. Nevertheless, as Humanists we cannot condone ideological coercion, either theological or political, or the attempt to lure the young into acceptance of a majoritarian "civic religion," whether the victims of this popular but odious practice are conservative religious minorities or secular unbelievers. Humanists are themselves frequent targets of those who equate American loyalty with ceremonial piety and good citizenship with belief in God - or at least the willingness to play the game of God-talk without conspicuous reservations. This is something Humanists cannot do.

Nontheistic Naturalism - The Common Denominator of Humanists

Humanists in the tradition and organizational orbit of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, and of its 1973 sequel, Humanist Manifesto II, include both those who define themselves as "religious Humanists" and those who are nonreligious. But it is a mistake to suppose, as the religious press often presumes, that this difference among Humanists hinges upon an argument about theism - about belief in the existence of God defined as a supernatural personal power who created and sustains the Universe. As the editor of the American Humanist Association's newsletter observed after surveying members on their beliefs: "There are no theists out there." Her

observation includes those who describe themselves as religious Humanists as well as those who take a strictly secularist (nonreligious) position.

My personal observation of members of other related Humanist organizations, including the Ethical Culture movement, the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and avowed Humanists among the Unitarian Universalists, convinces me that similar results would be found among these groups also. Therefore, while Humanists of our naturalistic and pragmatic philosophical outlook may disagree about the meaning and scope of religion - disputing whether the concept of religion can properly be extended to a nontheistic system of observance and belief such as Humanism - we are, almost without exception, not theists, as that term is ordinarily understood.

Humanists in our venue then, including religious Humanists, are not at ease with God-speak. The few who do, at least occasionally, resort to "God language" employ it for restricted application and only after explicitly qualifying their terms.

Once it is understood that the common ground of nonbelief in the God of theism is shared by all Humanists of the naturalistic stamp, we recognize that we confront a common situation: We are dissenters in a culture devoutly - often aggressively - committed to God-speak.

No Humanist could have endured the candidates' debates of the 1988 presidential campaign without facing the ubiquitous assumption that all right-thinking, flag-loving Americans are prepared to snap to attention to declare fealty to "one nation under God." A Humanist cannot enter a courtroom as a witness without being confronted with an oath administered with the obligatory expostulation, "So help me God." The alternative affirmation is often awkward and sometimes costly to secure; even a quarter century after the *Torcaso versus Watkins* ruling of the Supreme Court, bigoted and bullying lower court judges and administrators occasionally invoke drastic sanctions against objectors, with penalties meted out before an appeal can be effected. (Note the case of a non theist recently jailed for contempt for refusing a judge's preemptory demand to swear in God's name.)

Far more serious than these unconscionable - but fortunately rare - lapses into judicial tyranny, are the massive, pervasive intimidations of the impressionable young, the school child who from the earliest grades meets the presumption of God-belief in countless patriotic rituals and civic symbols: God claiming magisterial authority in the flag salute; God being invoked in countless patriotic songs and poems; God demanding

recognition in public holidays, such as Thanksgiving Day and the Fourth of July; God appearing on the coinage, on stamps, in the national motto, in recitations of the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence.

Many of these intrusions of theistic rhetoric and symbol are egregious and must continue to be challenged in the courts as the violations of constitutional liberty that they are. Nothing contained in my argument should be construed to justify capitulation to practices that compromise freedom of thought and violate the Bill of Rights. But even when we have secured all that can be won through rigorous enforcement of the First Amendment, we are still left with a considerable repository of theistic language and symbol, a legacy inseparable from our cultural memory and political evolution.

Many of these historic artifacts and literary memorials, from the cadences of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to the Four Freedoms of Roosevelt and Churchill, are as precious to Humanists as to other Americans. (Our Canadian compatriots will note their own litany of such memorials - and without even the protective filter of a constitutional First Amendment.) How, then, do we nontheists orient ourselves - and, most critically, relate our vulnerable young offspring, to a heritage of art, law, history and literature saturated with God-speak?

If we were content to be only a closeted circle of intellectualizing dissidents, we might ignore the problem, or respond by massive, uncompromising denial. But if Humanism is to interact effectively and creatively as an educational and spiritual movement in its own right, it must make sense in its own way of a heritage steeped in theistic symbol and metaphor. Interpreting the human past to our children poses such a test.

To live up to its promise, Humanism must function at the level of the nursery school and kindergarten as well as the philosophical academy; it must serve the hearth as much as the laboratory and inform the scout troop no less than the graduate seminar. We have the mission of educating the child and inducting the adolescent of the Humanist family into an intellectual universe that includes the two Humanist Manifestos (nontheistic affirmations of human worth) as well as the Declaration of Independence (predicating human dignity as a right derived from God).

The problem is not insuperable, but the vitality and influence of Humanism requires a sensitive and wise interfacing of these initially discordant elements. While some may dismiss such issues as secondary questions

- not of the first order in determining the metaphysical and logical foundations of Humanist theory - they are nonetheless crucial to the daily practice of Humanism as a philosophy of life or "life-stance."

#### Recognizing that Language is Multi-functional

Theologically derived symbolism and imagery does not lend itself to simple definition or easy explanation, as our foregoing discussion has already illustrated. If a philosophically literate friend asks me whether I believe in God or not, I have little problem in answering candidly that I do not. (We can leave aside for the present whether I am an atheist or an agnostic, or possibly some other variant of disbeliever.) In the context of our discussion, it is clear enough, in general terms, what my philosopher friend is interested in knowing about my belief system when he inquires about my God belief.

But if my philosopher friend and I happen to be invited to join a famous chorus because of our excellent singing voices - in my case a considerably less probable event than the bodily existence of Zeus - I should belt out the stanzas of the *Messiah* or of *Judas Maccabeus* as lustily as any high-church Anglican would sing them. (Of course, it might be equally difficult to ascertain exactly what the Anglican presupposes about the figures in the text.) But my philosopher friend presumably will not admonish me for my lack of Humanist constancy. Art triumphs over metaphysics, and even atheists can delight in Michelangelo's Creation of Adam.

How then do I explain God to a five year old? A considerably more knotted issue for the Humanist than justifying the anthems of the *Messiah* to my philosopher friend - who probably requires no justification! The problem of dealing with the five year old's question is related to many other knotty and thorny questions: Do I take the oath, God-speak included, in a court of law? Do I alter the pledge to the flag, perhaps swallowing the "under God?" Of greater importance, what do I advise a child seeking my guidance? What should the child be prepared to tell his pious grandmother who would be devastated by the scantiest scent of "atheism?" Is Kantian honesty even possible when God-speak shades off from the arcane articles of the Nicæan Creed (which in good conscience I could not for an instant profess to believe) to the lofty and self-validating metaphors of Bach and Whitman (with which I spontaneously resonate)?

We have here not one question but many, and the answers are probably as complex and multiform as the various shades of temperament and taste among Humanists. It is not my purpose in this discussion to attempt a "correct" answer for Humanists, nor do I believe that uniformly cor-

rect answers are even possible. What I propose instead is to suggest some of the ways in which people in our culture, including, on occasion, Humanists, use "theomorphic" language, and what they mean by it.

#### Humanists Insist on the Ethics of Language

Humanists are among the last of the puritans in insisting that their religious professions and utterances square with their beliefs. For many others in contemporary culture, what one expresses religiously is of slight importance, so that convenience and opportunism hold sway. Yet, as observed already, total candor and absolute explicitness of belief are probably, in many circumstances, unattainable.

A zealot who, during a rendering of the *Missa Solemnis* shouted out, "God is a figment of your imagination," would be a boor as well as a very special breed of fundamentalist crank - a fundamentalist of unbelief. It would require a rigidly orthodox cast of mind, however professedly "rationalist" and "humanist," to be incapable of thrilling to the sacred dialectic of *Job* or to the celestial pageantry of St. John's Apocalypse.

Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* belongs to the iconography of Humanism equally with Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Cnidus*. Jehovah (Yahweh) and Wotan - and Amaterasu Omi-kami - pertain to the same universal pantheon of cultural evolution; when a thousand years have passed, our descendants will look upon the *Pieta* and the compassionate Kwan Yin with equal equanimity and admiration. Our contemporary war against the theocrats - as desperate and as crucial as it surely is - ought not to overwhelm our Humanism as conservators of a future in which no god reigns and all gods mirror the human visage. Feuerbach redux!

#### A Table of God-Speak

This leads me to a final observation and proposal. I observe that the decay of the theistic conception of the world, a process as constant as the decay of the radioactive elements, has created a large mass of contemporary men and women who share most, or all, of the naturalistic Humanist worldview, but who use God-speak in accommodating themselves (and especially their children) to the cultural traditions and religious institutions of our civilization. Humanists must recognize many of these people as allies in defending the liberal heritage, champions of the intellectual values of science and the humanities. Their nominal "theism" does not make them supernaturalists; for all practical purposes they are functional Humanists - "closet"

Humanists, if you will - whose God-speak represents social accommodation rather than genuine metaphysical theism.

While staunch non theists may deplore their compromise, and correctly point out the risk to intellectual clarity and integrity involved - the danger of seductive descent into an easy accommodation of religious authoritarianism - we can hardly deny the real cultural influences that make many thoughtful people feel that some degree of cohabitation with tradition is justifiable and necessary. Erik H. Erikson, for example, observed in *Childhood and Society*: "Many are proud to be without religion whose children cannot afford to be without it."

Children in particular need parental and communal guidance in learning to deal with the disparate belief systems and mythic languages which they encounter on every hand. A strategy of absolute rejection may become a recipe for total alienation. Some lubricating capacity to surmount and appreciate differences is required to preserve social amity. The ability to view the world through many different lenses, to see it by contrasting lights and colors, is a source of both psychological health and intellectual verity.

Humanists, then, have much to gain and little to lose in recognizing their philosophical allies and sympathizers among many who still hold to some degree of theistic imagery and metaphor. This requires learning to discriminate between those whose God-talk represents dyed-in-the-wool supernaturalism and those whose God is a figure of metaphor, a mere ceremonious image of the humane virtues idealized. The contemporary world contains many more of the latter than of avowed Humanists. As Dr. Gallop has shown with remarkable consistency over several decades, 95% of Americans profess to believe in God. Yet when these same people are further questioned about the content of their God-belief, a much smaller number believe in a Supreme Being who is a personal deity and creator of the universe. Various surveys show a variety of results, but agree that when given a chance to choose among various conceptions of "God," substantial numbers identify God as simply Nature, as creativity in the world and human life, or simply as ideal values.

Since Humanists assign a high value to the ethics of language, but also recognizing that meaning follows usage as religious and philosophical conceptions evolve, I propose that we bring order out of the existing chaos by classifying the major ways in which theomorphic signs and symbols are used in common discourse - in theology, art, poetry, jurisprudence, political rhetoric, and popular culture. Implicit in my suggestion is the



recognition that a child reciting "under God" in the flag salute, a metaphysician reading a paper on the Whiteheadian conception of deity, an actor declaiming Whitman's mystical naturalism, and an ordinand subscribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles are NOT envisaging the same "God," or even a similar conception. Indeed, two school children standing side by side rendering the flag salute will each attach entirely idiosyncratic meanings to their affirmations - and we cannot even be sure about any two metaphysicians expounding Whitehead.

To facilitate distinguishing among disparate usages, I offer the following Table that classifies some of the principal ways in which theistic-seeming language is employed in every-day patterns and conventions. The value of such a Table is that it helps us to escape from the illusion that God-speak is univocal and unambiguous. God-speak is seldom fungible.

Without pretending to legislate, we note the following *principal* ways in which theistic-seeming (theomorphic) language is frequently employed. Other common usages may occur to the reader.

#### Four Principal Types of God-Speak in Common Parlance

Analyzing language in the varied applications discussed above, we find allusions to God answering to at least four different functions. (The reader may think of others.) God-language is highly plastic in adapting to these varied interests and usages, so that no common element of theism runs throughout, except the word "God" itself, signifying nothing in particular, surviving only as a conventionalized rubric signifying veneration or respect for an indefinite range of values in view.

1) - The first of the four meanings we would note is that corresponding to the classic definition of the God of theism, which the dictionary particularizes as "belief in one God, transcending the universe in his personality yet imminent in it in his knowledge and action - a God Billy Graham would readily recognize on any heavenly street corner.

2) - The second special usage is allied to the first and grew out of it in the early history of philosophy, the metaphysical, a philosophical conception, as in Aristotle's "unmoved mover," a usage not necessarily implying religious sentiment or piety; deity perceived as an ontological principle. (The theist in this philosophical context need not be religious at all, and may believe, in fact, that God is not spiritually accessible to human beings.)

the silver dollar - a bird that never flew over land or sea, but which represents a human interest, moral attachment, or conception of value. This is often the "God" of patriotic song, legend, and drama, where the symbolic status of deity is frequently explicit or strongly implied as the spirit of "Nature," "Truth," or whatever. It is only in this metaphorical sense that many people can speak of "God" without serious moral and intellectual reservations.

4) - Closely linked to the preceding, but differing in tone is the *formulary* or *conventional* usage of God-language in legal jargon, as in describing damage from storm or earthquake as "an act of God." Even atheists may claim in good conscience an act of God to absolve themselves in a law suit. The "so help me God" of the judicial oath is a more troublesome example of formulary or conventionalized speech. A "purer" example of conventionalized or formulary speech, and thus one raising no problems, is the "Good-bye" (God be wi' ye) noted earlier - and found in many other common expressions.

Measured in terms of this Table of usage, much of the theistic symbolism rampant in our culture dwindles like the visage of Marley's ghost on Scrooge's doorknocker. The God of theism, when representative of the sincere and unforced conviction of honest believers, is properly honored by Humanists; but lacking that warrant, God-talk is no more worthy of respect than prattle about the Tooth Fairy or Jack Frost. (The doctrinaire theist is complacent in the thought that skepticism cannot impeach a belief impervious to falsification; but Mickey Mouse and Peter Pan are equally secure against disproof.)

In the final accounting, the credibility of God-talk is not to be found in the logical invulnerability of its referent, but in the moral influence of its humanizing metaphors. The nontheistic Humanist does not subscribe to the theist's God; but the Humanist accepts the authority of the humane virtues that the God-metaphor at its best illuminates in story and song. On that common ground of ethical affirmation the Humanist can join hands with those who use the dramatizing myths and metaphors of God-speak to celebrate human solidarity and worth. But beyond this fellowship of shared moral ends we cannot go. For the Humanist, there is neither god nor salvation other than the moral potentialities alive in human kinship and aspiration.

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