

The image shows the front cover of an antique book. The central panel is made of aged, light brown leather or parchment, featuring a repeating pattern of stylized, symmetrical figures that resemble bees or small insects. These figures are arranged in two columns, with two figures in each column. The figures have a central vertical line and symmetrical, wing-like shapes on either side. The cover is framed by a wide, dark border with intricate, raised gold-tooled designs. On the right side of the border, there is a circular medallion containing a cross. The overall appearance is that of a well-preserved but aged historical volume.

Once Every Day Becomes Easter

Marc Williams



Once Every Day Becomes Easter aims to hone the beginnings of a new consensus toward bridging Christianity with science, medicine, and our own psychology to revive the truth that we belong to God and not only ourselves, and to work through the personal issues of forging a muscular faith in our Lord. Beyond the old ways of idol worship, circumcision, and religious laws lies a richer way from God and not ourselves: His Holy Mystery.

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**ONCE EVERY DAY
BECOMES EASTER**

Marc Williams

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HATING TO GIVE UP CHURCH, THIS TIME

While I have always known the differences between God and church, sitting in a pew on Sunday mornings had clearly either felt right or not to me at different times in my life. I could not wait to leave church in my teenage years, because it was boring and repetitive, as though I was on permanent suspension in the principal's office at school. My father had died suddenly when I was twelve years old, and this did not endear me to God. The relation between the loss of my father and my slackened belief in God later became clear.

God largely remained on the outskirts of my life for the next 6-7 years, until I began to watch portions of what would later become a pivotal thrust forward: the 1977 NBC biographical film, *Jesus of Nazareth*. In those years, it was shown on television once a year for several years, and I would watch different parts of it at a time, half-realizing it was slowly drawing me into some sort of spiritual bee-hive I had never sensed so clearly in the Bible. The film lasts over six hours, and covers the entire basic Gospel story in a fairly traditional manner, yet it felt so alive to me, compared to the Biblical "print and no pictures." It would take several years for me to watch this film even once in its entirety, such was the tortoise pace of my journey. I then again half-lapsed for a while, until I *saw* Jesus, literally, without any doubt, and His door to me has stayed open ever since.

About two years later, I stumbled across a book about the Shroud of Turin (long-thought to perhaps be the actual burial

cloth of Jesus), written by one of about forty American scientists who examined the Shroud in 1978, this approved by Pope John Paul II after much wrangling within the Vatican¹. The book was quite technical at times, but there was no mistaking the sense of vibrational wonder these physicists, chemists and others felt in the Shroud's presence, once they realized it was neither a painting nor a forgery. They had already discovered that even a photograph of the Shroud had three-dimensional properties that no other photograph contains. The subsequent report of their findings, the 1988 carbon dating situation and the rise and fall of both skepticism and belief in the Shroud's authenticity are well-described in many articles, books and films. I would recommend two films in particular: *Silent Witness* (1978) as well as a 2010 History Channel documentary, *The Real Face of Jesus*. Once the Shroud hooked me, something had changed which eased my Christian malaise for good. More recently, I learned about the Sudarium of Oveido, the face-cloth upon Jesus during the crucifixion, and its similarities to the Shroud image in both physical features and blood type. I had become a "Shroudie," with uncharacteristically evangelical fervor.

Being a poet for my entire adult life, my Christian journey began to creep occasionally and then more steadily into my verse over many years. I have written about 70 poems on Christianity or related themes since watching *Jesus of Nazareth* and reading that Shroud book nearly thirty years ago. The poems have hastened greatly since watching *The Real Face of Jesus* three years ago, having re-discovered the Shroud after---like most of the public, but not the scientists---the 1988 carbon dating claim that it was

¹ Heller, John. *Report on the Shroud of Turin*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1983.

likely fake. My poetry has given me a chance to try to work out some of the kinks of my faith in a way that would likely exasperate my fellow congregants at church. In that sense, my Christian faith has largely developed outside of church, which eventually made it easier to leave, over a year ago.

My wife was already dissatisfied with church, and had stopped going for about six months until I dragged her back for the last year or so. She did not find it fulfilling in the sense of the church service itself, which is largely the same over various Protestant denominations, week after week. I came to call this “the monotony of performances,” such things as announcements, hymns, children’s time, the Lord’s prayer and sermons, always in the same order, what the clergy sometimes calls the Order of Service. I have asked myself how I would change or reinvigorate a church service, and am admittedly stumped. Loosening their dependence on the often cloudy-pathed Lectionary would be a start. We just came to know that it no longer inspired us. We felt out place and had little in common with our fellow worshippers. I had been dissatisfied with several pastors, and, having helped hire our last minister, saw this as a good time to part company, largely without any serious regrets.

I know there are churches where we could spiritually grow and feel more at home, but we can not find such a church, as their regimentation is a large part of our problem. It is not hard for us to understand why people quit going to church. Some lose faith, but mine has grown *despite* (not) going to church. Jesus never built a church, and God finds us everywhere He wishes. What I hate is to feel like a perennial outsider without succoring fellowship with others to praise and gravitate toward our risen Lord. Trolling the Internet to find useful sermons feels too detached from such fellowship, but it seemingly must do.

*

Until I re-discovered the Shroud, I never gave a lot of thought to the clergy, in terms of whether they had much to offer me. All of them seem competent in the sense of both Biblical knowledge as well as how to run a church. Frankly, the ones I had known seemed fairly similar, offering about the same sort of church experience. I have always been Presbyterian, so perhaps this is simply a function of denominational familiarity and consistency. Nothing riveting generally happens in a Presbyterian worship service, and apparently is not supposed to. We are generally not evangelicals, although a few call themselves such. We don't speak in tongues, have Christian rock bands during worship, or dance in the pews. Our nickname is "the frozen chosen," probably from John Calvin's rather austere theology, which I will discuss in the third chapter.

In the past couple of years, I began to notice what to me is an overly bland, nibbling-around-the-edges kind of Christianity that presents a "seems like" faith, without delving into much of anything beyond an overly shallow level. Before that time, I was not ready to consider leaving church again, or just did not pay much attention to the clergy's "as if" style. I began to notice their overly frequent use of the word "broken" in describing human foibles, as though this word had crept into their seminary training and so demanded regular usage. I began to notice nothing much new ever happened in church, that its Sundays and seasons had a rather predicable course of events, and church never really traveled anywhere, in particular. My fellow congregants did not seem to mind this, as I heard no complaints, even when pastors left, too often in a bit of a hurry.

I began to wonder if seminary training itself, much like medical or legal training, tends to discourage creativity in favour of a

very straightforward approach to both the Bible and spirituality, as though everything has already been discovered, and pastors are mainly Christian caretakers at this point. I knew that they clearly do not get enough training in how to give soul-feeding sermons, which do not tend to come from scripted messages of Biblical interpretations with an up-lifting bit of hope at the end. I began to think about how Jesus used to talk to His followers, standing or sitting in plain sight and speaking with the voice of God until He had said enough. There was no choir, no order of service or no cheery ending, just the soul-striking presence of God. I became aware of the eventually unbearable gap between our pastors and Jesus. Not just because they are human and He is divine, but because too many pastors are just spiritually lazy.

I know the clergy has a hard job, that their status has diminished in the past half-century because of social and scientific changes, and we rarely ask their opinion when current events evoke thoughts of God, such as from natural disasters. But it is the job they choose in this time in our history, that it has always been hard to convert people to true spirituality, and Jesus would tell them *this is what God called you to do*. Only quite recently has the clergy begun to realize their collective blandness has hurt their cause. They are scared to death about losing their churches, and there is as yet no clear organized response to what may well be continuing attrition and nights of sweaty hand-wringing. At this point, the survival of the Christian church is largely up to them. All they can do is to *find* Jesus, perhaps really for the first time.

PRAYER AND MIRACLES: HOW DOES GOD ACTUALLY RESPOND TO US?

Before I discuss my sense of prayer, two detours. First, when I mentioned the notion of *locus of control* in an earlier chapter, in psychology, this is presented as a dichotomous way of being in the world. While it does have some value, this concept is also somewhat falsely rigid, in the sense that the internal vs. external is presented in an either/or orientation, whereas, in real life, there is a fluid exchange between what we do and how we control ourselves, and what happens anyway. “The best-laid plans of mice and men,” to which I respond with *life unfailingly happens*. I do like the church word *intentional*, to the extent that it reflects a sense of purpose which occurs regularly in the face of distractions, time constraints and, for many, doubts about God. Prayer would be an example of asking God for His intervention in our lives, and graciously accepting the *yes* or *no* that results. We are the ones who pray, but He is the one who answers or not, which leads to many of us to not pray at all, because we want to control His responses. Parenting our Father?

Second, my sense of how God responds to us, whether through our prayers or otherwise. Where John Calvin misses the point about Godly Providence is when he mistakes what God can do, compared to what God does do. In terms of evolution, God could have stopped with the primates, not created us, and the world would remain in fine shape: no pollution, no over-population, no deforestation, no chemical spills, no murder and the seasons would still always “go round and round” (Joni Mitchell). He

“drank the gamble” because God wanted to see if we could ever be successfully harnessed to obey His purpose through our own efforts and maintain respect for His Creation if He granted us the free will to do so. Thumbs, a bit more intelligence, self-consciousness and its fraternal twin---free will---are what separate us from the other mammals. Our obedience to God does not come from strait-jacketed submission, but from an evolving intentional devotion which remembers that we are always smaller than and dependent upon Him for our lives at all, and that what we make with our talents comes from what He already created.

Life as it happens. God is neither the Deist who created the world and then went on permanent vacation or fell asleep forever, nor a meddling micromanager of every little thing we say and do. I would say God created the conditions for biological and galactic life to flourish, and there certainly are a lot of surprising details in that. For us, He is the One who watches and listens, picks and chooses who, how and when to become involved for His purpose, not ours. Perhaps most of the time, God simply lets life happen on its own, independently of either His or our control. I don’t mean Nature, but rather what happens in our lives. God neither tells me what exact words I am to write just now, nor does He intentionally give someone else cancer. Our sense of God’s moment-to-moment involvement in our lives to me is not that blurry, and yet it has never been well-defined, particularly by the clergy. I think we just know when He is directly involved, whether we as Christians call this the *Holy Spirit* or not.

What do I mean by “God just lets life happen? If there is an overall plan, God set in motion the universe (astronomers say by the “Big-Bang”), created galaxies of planets, fashioned gravity,

light and heat, started microorganisms, and allowed evolution to spiral its increasingly complex life-forms. This for me is actually more interesting than the Creation story found in Genesis, being both particular and detailed as well as grand and far beyond our own conceptualizations. Six days became 13-plus *billion* years. All of this may have been necessary eventually, so much later, to create us. Was it God rather than Adam who was “lonely” for companionship? All of this is His “intelligent design,” but once we are borne as a species, because of our singular free will, God lets things happen because He wants to see what we will do. Obey or disobey or become indifferent? I would explain natural disasters as His risk of allowing weather to occur at all. The same with diseases or crime or war. God never prevents us from being ourselves, for better and for worse. I reject both the Old Testament’s and Calvin’s sense of a wrathful God, who punishes us for our endlessly self-defeating sins. I sin all the time, and He never seems to punish me. Instead, God grimaces again and waits for the next time or the next day. Mostly, God waits, *a lot*. His “mysterious ways” are, for Him, moments or episodes when we “feel His hand at work.” Those moments can be completely inexplicable in human terms, and that is when we find God, for sure. God has the patience of all the saints, born and unborn. I feel certain that He mourns over us every day, but doesn’t laugh nearly often enough. Our Father’s work is to watch His flock, and shepherd us sometimes with His staff, the length of which we can barely conjure. God waits, suffers and hopes for us.

*

Prayer has been described in countless ways: as breath, as actions, as communion, as emptiness before God, as the spoken yoke between He and us, and mostly, when we again feel smaller than at almost any other time. Prayer has been ritualized for many centuries, but has become more idiosyncratic and

ragged in our own time. People want to pray their own prayers, not scripted hand-me-downs from an earlier century. People, including me, too often pray waywardly and at our own convenience. The clergy rarely teach us how to pray in a way that improves the chances God will respond to us. Their prayers during church services are usually too generic, and I doubt God truly listens to them or takes them seriously. They are prayers that can be said when we are asleep. He knows better. What I wonder is not only how to pray “more effectively,” but what prayers in what situations does God actually respond to?

Let me begin to answer this in the negative. If any of us prays for peace on earth, and there is no greater peace the next day, month or year, is such prayer useless and a waste of time? Yes and no. Prayer tries to bridge the gap between the human and the divine, but God as our “divine agent” decides the value of our prayers, not us. While there may be no greater peace on earth that results from such prayers, we feel better for saying them, since praying has a palliative purpose for those in need. The better question is whether we are praying out of habit or out of need. We all know that too many prayers are spoken habitually or out of what Calvin might call “cheap needs,” that is, selfish needs for something, the silliest being for our team to win a certain game. God does not care about sports or politics or the size of our bank accounts. There is so much that God does not care about that is solipsistically human, as *God was never human*. We get angry with God all the time for not answering our prayers, but what if He doesn’t care about many of our own interests? We feel that, because God created us and hence we are “special,” that He must be interested in everything about us. *No, He isn’t*. Rather, God is our Father who knows best, what we need, and not merely wanting something selfishly human. Prayers that make no attempt to actually bridge the human-

divine gap will likely be unanswered. Is what we are praying about of interest mainly to ourselves or also to God? Prayer can not “succeed” if it too generic or too human. God would say *no*, that doesn’t concern Me.

If my patient load slackens, I pray to God that I can continue to provide service to those whom He deems in need of my treatment, and that He could encourage new clients to contact me. After all, I *am* trying to help others, so why wouldn’t God oblige me? Having done this repeatedly, I am inclined to say that such prayers help occasionally but not regularly, and it could be only coincidence if I get new patients from praying for them. Many of us have a felt need for God to grant us something important, such as better health for ourselves or our loved ones, sounder finances, a new job or a clear sign to go on living at all. We take everything He has already provided for granted, namely, the world in which we live, and so often ask for more. Perhaps God resents us for asking for more of what He either already gives us or has no interest in giving us. God is not an especially sentimental Father, in the sense that He “falls for” what we want but He does not think we need, so we can not “trick” Him. It is not that such prayers are manipulative, but they may well not serve God’s purpose. A pastor reminded me that, when God says *no* to our prayers, He feels like the Father we barely want: One who is strict, fair and knows best. Was God born during early 1960s television?

If a perennially unseen God provokes in Christians our ambivalence over the desire for union with Him against the fear of either disappointment or sacrifice from Him (what in psychology is called an approach-avoidance conflict), it is in prayer that this ambivalence more clearly reveals itself. Since we have no control over what God does or does not do to influence

us, some (or many) say: Why pray to someone I can not see, can not touch, who may or may not be concerned with me? Yes, this is narcissism again, but, to be fair to us, prayer is generally about ourselves and those we know and love, rather than primarily for unknown others or the state of the world. All prayers walk the fence between selfishness and concern for others. Prayers are like marriage in that sense --I want to share my life with my wife, but I can not be swallowed up by her. We are not praying to a human father, and that awkwardness is apparent for quite a while. Again, we are inclined to resist God out of fear or in feeling the gap between the human and divine, which even Jesus can not always help us to cross, despite His example, as *we can never fully become Jesus*. Prayer is *surrender* to God, who is knowable only on His terms: His interest in us, His desire to influence us and the manner of such influence. God only surprises us with such influence, so how can our prayers “influence His influence” over us? This is not tautological, because if there is a real relationship between us and God, it comes either through prayer or He just does what he wants when He wants: *the miracles*.

In time-honoured confessional manner, resistance to God becomes the seeds of our prayer life, it is where we start. Such embarrassing confessions are more for us than for God, since He knows when we are amateur prayers. We might say: “I don’t know what to say to You, where do I start?” When I ask patients to role-play other people in their lives and they look confused after I explain the method, I tell them: “just start talking, it will come,” and it usually does. Early prayer life is largely confessional, relieving the awkwardness of talking to an unseen Supreme Being that feels like a squirmy audition for a part that we are not sure we want, but it might further our acting careers. We have to become comfortable with the evolvingly-obvious

fact that God knows everything and created everything, and, next to Him, we are, at whatever age, still only His children, and that never changes. We want to be His equals because we are grown-ups, raise our own children and sometimes manage other people at work. In prayer, we surrender to being a child again unto a Father who is omniscient yet cares for us at the perfect times. I admit that God feels more like *Abba* than *Daddy*. Would it help for us to kneel while praying?

In prayer, we will remain resistant until it begins to shrink or melt out of cumulative confessions or He responds to us. Prayer has to become natural and comfortable, or it will become haphazard, or probably abandoned altogether. Some say resistance to prayer is to show our clenched fists to God and demand that He respond to us. It can be that (such as after a loved one dies), but, more often, it is the unfamiliar awkwardness of talking to someone who seems on the other side of a wall that we can not see or touch. Prayer has to be more than talking to ourselves, it has to find and lure God to us in our need. Prayer has to say: *Come to me, Lord, not more than anyone else, but do come to me, now.*

It has taken me nearly forever to start praying on a daily basis, usually at bedtime, even after I re-discovered the Shroud, and so had “a real reason to pray” from that “proof.” It is still too often mildly awkward until I get going, and, because I can not feel any response from God, it seems I *am* talking to myself. I thank Him for all the blessings of the Four Elements and of family that He provides, I thank Him for Jesus, and I, as everyone else does, ask God for something. One pastor refers to our “vending machine God,” who offers options as to what might satisfy us on a given day. Even if *God was never human*, in the first moments of prayer, I still long to see His face and hear His voice. It is

Christian foolishness to deny our common difficulty in accepting God as anything other than a really wise person. We know He is not, but, being only human, jumping that gap between the human and the divine every night at bedtime can be a strain. In my early poems about Christianity, I conjured God as having twelve eyes, one for each hour, and thus He was panoptical, seeing in all directions at once. I thought Heaven had a brick wall around it, with Jesus' crucifixional blood staining the brick as a sign of His unimaginable sacrifice for us. I now think of Heaven as being in a "fourth dimension" of time and space, unknown to most of us until we get there. My prayers sputter too easily, and I think about Jews at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem who rhythmically pray without ceasing. I can actually bridge the human-divine gap easier when I am *not* praying. I know God is out there, which, for me, was the revelation that was the slowest-moving train in my direction, yet it arrived in a hurry and startled me.

How does God respond to our prayers? As before, I will first try to answer this in the negative. If our prayers are bland, generic or have no clear focus or request, I would say that God generally ignores such prayers. *What am I being asked to do*, He might say. If we pray for peace or happiness or an end to war, God will likely ignore these also. God allows situations to occur that He is not ready to intervene upon, which is to say most situations. Thus, many prayers will "fail" to impress God as to the necessity of Him responding to them. God's *no* to our prayers is simply His silence. He will hear such prayers, but does not respond to them, and, of course, this seeming disinterest both angers and saddens us, as though God does not care about us. But God is not a human father, and He bides His time, waiting the situational moment to intervene. In that sense, God is akin to a surgeon, whose scalpel is His special intervention in the place and time of His choosing, not ours. If God does not respond to

selfish requests, unfocused prayers or generic wishes, I do think He responds to both our sincerity as well as the sense of urgency and purpose in our prayers. This will become clearer when I talk about near-death experiences, which are sometimes preceded by intense, often familial, praying.

When Jesus prays to God before raising Lazurus from the dead (*Gospel of John 11:1-44*), He was obviously persuasive, but how? Because of the situation: Martha and Mary beseeched Jesus to return their brother, whom Jesus loved, to life. It was the fourth day since Lazurus had died, a day past the three-day period of Jewish burial customs, when the deceased would have decayed too much for continued mourning at his tomb. Jesus had delayed coming so as to arrive “too late,” testing the women’s faith in Him that He could intervene on their behalf. When Lazurus is raised, God reveals Himself in Jesus by doing what had never happened before: love sparing life from certain death. Suppose all the remaining eleven disciples had prayed together, hand in hand, before Jesus at His Crucifixion. Would God have also spared Him?

So, there is both the confessional, palliative aspect of prayer that is what is commonly called “talking to God,” and the more urgent, beseeching aspect that might be called “God, make something happen, *and now!*” The confessional aspect is for us to be relieved of emotional, physical or relational burdens, while the beseeching aspect calls upon God for necessarily remedial action: to save a life, to spare a life or prevent a tragedy. It is the relief from personal anguish, the need for something positive, the easing of pain, or to be spared another’s death. God may grant us what He understands to be necessary for us, which we request, and He gifts to us. The mystery becomes if, how and when, as God seems to respond to the particularities of our lives,

if at all. Prayer begins as human, but ends up being “owned” by God, who decides its “value.” Unless we can accept that God is capable of ignoring our “requests” for His intervention because these do not suit His purpose, prayer will often be frustrating stuff. God can seemingly be indifferent to our concerns in refusing to obviously help us time and again. He can be a very aggravating Father on a nightly basis, *but then there are the miracles.*

*

Miracles. The English philosopher David Hume summarized his argument against miracles as “*No miracle can be the foundation for any religion,*” presumably even Jesus’ resurrection. Humans can not perform miracles, so that miracles could only be performed by God and not by ourselves is obvious even to the skeptic. So what can we say when a miracle occurs? That our narcissism is usurped by a God who helps those in need in bypassing our beliefs, our medicine and even the unfairness of who lives and who dies. Miracles do happen, even doctors admit so. People survive accidents when it seems impossible to do so. Someone dies, visits Heaven and returns alive, healed and grateful. To deny miracles when they are blatantly clear is narcissistically childish. The better question beyond “Do miracles really happen?” becomes “How does God decide upon whom to perform His miracles, and why?”

In his lengthy book, *Miracles* (2011), scholar Craig Keener generously provides a wealth of examples of miracles (some with medical corroboration), mainly from non-Western countries, whose Christianity has a decidedly evangelical flavour. Most of these miracles occur after praying, and provoke many to convert to Christianity from other religions, resulting in

impressive church growth in a rather short period of time.³ These converts recognize that Jesus, rather than their own sense of God, figures into these miracles in some fashion, or at least this is explained to them once they join Christian churches. We could ask: Are miracles not possible through non-Christian faiths? Presumably yes, so why their conversion to Christianity, and what does Jesus have to offer them that is distinctly better? For example, did Mohammed perform miracles? More importantly, why does God perform miracles more often in emergency medical situations? This, of course, is where near-death experiences tend to occur, as often the bodily processes of death have already begun. What sorts of prayers prod God to *immediately* reverse the dying process?

Medical miracles seem to fascinate God, in the sense that He is more inclined to respond to them as our divine healing agent, generally from the impetus of our prayers. Jesus healed people even without prayers, because “*your faith has healed you.*” Do medical crises slacken our usual resistance to God to allow a fresh sincerity in our prayers, a sense of desperation, to which He responds? Is this desperation a momentarily greater sense of trust in God to affect us, that our resistance to Him temporarily disappears, as agnostic soldiers do in their “foxhole pleas” to be saved while bullets or bombs whiz or explode all around them? Surely, God recognizes our sudden dependence on His capacity to intervene on our behalf, that we become humanly small again in the larger realm of His Creation and mercy. God saves those who otherwise have little or no faith in Him, never read the Bible or go to church, never think about Him otherwise, and yet He spares us death in the crisis before us. Miracles wonderfully smother us with God’s divine love, often against our own prior resistance to Him.

³ Keener, Craig. *Miracles*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011.

The last and most agonizing question about prayer and miracles is why God spares some people death or heals their diseases, but not others, sometimes in the same predicament. More people die than receive His miraculous touch. What is God's "rationale" for doing so? We can always say "it is God's will" or "His mysterious ways," but this does not really suit us, since we feel slighted by God if our loved ones receive no miraculous healing and die anyway. Why does God "play favourites?" Is it only the desperate sincerity of our prayers at the time? What is God's purpose to save a few and to let so many others die? Saying *God was never human* in that instance is not enough.

The only answer that occurs to me is that God feels our faith in Him during such crises in some way that is acutely singular for us, and that we transcend our "usual faith" to beseech His miraculous hand, when nothing else works. Surgical patients have survived even after the medical staff has given up and left the operating room. Is their family fervently praying for them during surgery? Perhaps. Jesus' healings often occur suddenly, when He is in the midst of teaching or traveling elsewhere. This situational mixture of desperation, beseeching prayer and accepting our dependence on God impresses Him that we are "worthy" of His help. Such is the true nature of God's, not Calvin's "Providence."

CONCLUSION:

**THE NEAR-DEATH
OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES
TO NUDGE OUR TRANSCENDENCE
TOWARD GOD**

Today, Muslim extremists shot and killed several political cartoonists in Paris, because their newspaper had repeatedly mocked Islamist radicals for terrorist activities, this after their office had first been fire-bombed three years ago. Someone else over here mused on the Internet about whether evangelical Christians have inadvertently become Pharisees, because of the perceived rigidity of their doctrinal views. Complaints about pride and narrow-mindedness are epidemic in regard to religious beliefs. The Bible itself is either fiercely defended as inerrantly accurate or largely dismissed as “ancient” and perhaps irrelevant in a scientific, secular society. Terrorism maligns God from any doctrinal perspective, and, in that sense, we as a species remain at square one, lamenting our loss of Jesus from the same doctrinal transfixity, some 2,000 years later. *God may wish we were never born.*

In social, political, cultural and military aspects of human life, we have used doctrines since people began to congregate in sufficient numbers to be more easily influenced to believe and behave in ways preferable to one over another of us. Human beings remain more gullible than cynical it seems, despite all of the reasons not to be so. We are duped by almost anyone or anything, some of us at one time, others at another time. We are too easily fooled because we know too little, depend too much

on others for what we know, and thereby expose ourselves to malignant influences. What I wind up saying to myself about many of my patients is *It's not that simple*, referring to their descriptions of and explanations for their predicaments. Doctrines by design try to simplify our lives by reducing life's complexities to something more tangible and bearable. Does any doctrine ever really align itself with the ways our world works? With doctrines, I won't even say that *we do the best we can*, because we don't.

It is not that doctrines are inherently bad or wrong (unless they are illegal or immoral), it is that they don't often satisfy our urges to capture life in a way that is either accurate or significantly beneficial to our society. Doctrines tend to be more convenient than practically useful. Pre-historic people just lived their lives, there were no doctrines, and they managed. I am not trying to be silly here, just to look at the chronically maladjusted propensity of people to create and adopt doctrines for their one-sided benefits and not for God's people as a whole. Doctrines have plagued Judaism and Christianity since their beginnings. Yes, Jesus was Jewish, but He never publicly fretted over which of 613 laws needed to be obeyed, *today*. In this sense, I doubt we Christians have learned anything since then. We are not re-inventing the wheel, rather the wheel is just *stuck*, and has been for longer than the fifty years of declining church attendance. It is crucifixion, it is Catholic indulgences in the Middle Ages, it is every religious war ever fought, and now, it is terrorism---foreign or home-grown---from the zealots, as of old. It is the same bad dream, churning in eternity unless we some day say: *What about God Himself, could He be our doctrine, what if our doctrines about God are more wrong than useful?*

For example, Christians in church regularly recite the Apostles or Nicene Creeds. These are straight-forward and I would say “harmless,” to the extent that they capture a certain doctrinal simplicity about Jesus and God which can be memorized and taught to youngsters. My question is: *what then?* Having said them aloud, what comes afterward? It is too often that *nothing* follows the recitation of creeds or doctrinal statements, although they are not meant to be an end to themselves. The creeds alone are recitations and not evocative or motivational, and thus are *not enough*. Jesus espoused no creeds, only the Lord’s Prayer, which actually has more practicality in its guidance. It is church and not Jesus that calcifies the creeds as being so worthwhile. *He just heals and ascends.*

*

Why am I yammering on about creeds and doctrines? Because *they have never been enough*. The original doctrine for the beguiling Israelites, the Ten Commandments, is presented twice by Moses in the Old Testament (*Exodus 20: 3-6* and *Deuteronomy 5:7*) foremost as God’s distaste for graven images, but Moses does not quite recognize that people will fill in the vacuum created by God’s being unseen with what gives them a literal focal object upon which to worship. I am not advocating idol worship, though I know from personal experience that *it is hard to find God*. Since God is not a bodily Father, the gap between the human and divine must somehow be bridged for us to find Him. Golden calves or money are poor substitutes for a Supreme Being, but what remains unseen makes us nervous, and we yearn for greater certainty. Any father must provide comfort, guidance and a sense of direction. The creation of the universe came before we humans could readily fit into its vast scope and carve out any sense of ourselves, which is what we have always done. Creeds and doctrines, like the entirety of the Old

Testament, are at most a starting-place, not where we must wind up as Christians. Everyone reminds us that the Bible is not a “how-to” book, which is true, but the problem comes not in how to extrapolate from the Bible to our lives, but that such extrapolation has to trudge through the swamp of our own psychology to grow roots in us and thrive.

The “double-failure” in the Bible of the Israelites to accept God in the Old Testament and Jesus as His transcendent Son in the New Testament---despite commandments, Jewish Law, the wrath of God in the Flood, an exhorting John the Baptist, the Sermon on the Mount and the Transfiguration---leaves us with the oldest and most nagging question: *What will work any better to influence us toward God as a species in a world teetering on moral and environmental degradation?* What will make us pray to God any more sincerely or regularly? What will prod us offer aid to others that benefits them more than ourselves? How do we put money in a more charitable perspective, while still attending to our own greediness? What the Church can no longer do is to recycle Bible stories on a weekly basis, have us recite creeds and give us a 15-minute pep talk before sending us out into a secular human world that turns against itself with such daily, uncharming ease.

In the Introduction, I mentioned my “cheap formula” of percentages regarding the Bible and church, our psychology and God’s Holy Mystery. You noticed that the Bible was fully equated with our psychology, and the Holy Mysteries received the smallest percentage. I also mentioned that we are the “living hosts” of God in the world. This means what He created exists on its own and that we had no part in its Creation, but, with our creation, everything changed, for better and for worse. We are the species over whom God bangs His head every night, while

shouting the word *stupid* in every language, including His own. Everything God has tried to do for us has nearly failed to be daily persuasive in His regard, for more than 2,000 years. No human doctrine, no creed, no Bible story has budged us enough as a species. All those creatures who can not think or read are biologically wiser than we are, because God made them that way. They run the world under His evolutionary guidance, and we throw our own children off bridges, as a father in Florida did yesterday. We *are* the Books of Psalms and Lamentations. We *are* still the Biblical double-failure---yesterday, today and tomorrow---and yet, God patiently wakes up and tries again. As I said, often *He just waits, for us, to find Him.*

*

I have only one answer to every question I have posed: not surprisingly, *God's Holy Mystery*. The three examples explain themselves for hungry Christians.

From our beginning as a species, we have had to deal with the hard facts of the world gifted to us, with its weather, its astronomy, its biology and its promise. That we did not create this world has always evoked the pondering of a question: If *not us, then who?* in the context of *We do not have to be here*. The Natural Mystery lends itself to our asking about a Maker because any atheistic sense of randomness is not answered by the fact that we as yet see no life on any other planets. To posit that there is no Creator answers nothing, because it is not yet factually certain. If I am randomly created---which I am, in the genetic sense---I don't feel that way just because I am. Viktor Frankl, who survived the Nazi concentration camps and went on to become a psychoanalyst, knew from his own experience there that we search for meaning and purpose, even in the worst circumstances. Atheists must answer why we have always

looked to gods to influence our lives in the first place. It is because, in the Natural world, *we feel small again*, and sometimes still in awe. It is because *we didn't create anything, someone else did*. Our narcissism is finally bridled in the face of Natural grandeur beheld once in a while on vacations or by those lucky enough to live in such places. My wife and I went back to Iceland this summer, as we consider it a place where it would be hard to go back home as an atheist, because we were beautifully *trapped* by its scenery, again. It is the Natural world before modernization, before television, beyond bad politics and generally lacking our American violence. The only problem is, it never warms up much.

The uncommonness of near-death experiences pushes them too easily to the periphery of our efforts to bridge the gap between the human and divine until we hear that kind of story which makes us shudder: where something God-like comes to the fore and causes us to look skyward and smile. Everyone will always say they can not be proven, but for anyone who has had one, such experiences are their own proof. Last year, a 37 year-old man in Ohio had a heart attack, lost all of his vital signs for 45 minutes and was presumed to have died. Yet he revived and is fine, with no damage to his heart or brain. The cardiologist treating him called it a “miracle.” Dr. Sam Parnia says people have been “out” (clinically dead) for *hours* in cold weather, and similarly survived.¹⁷ While they may not have had near-death experiences, certainly they would feel glad to survive, and be affected forever. People who seriously try to kill themselves sometimes have a positive near-death experience. Is this not God's forgiveness? Every religious belief or creed is absorbed into and altered by the best black hole during these experiences: *the love of God for us*. This is what everyone who has ever had a

¹⁷ Parnia, Sam. *Erasing Death*. New York: Harper One, 2013.

near-death experience talks about: *the light and the love*. Skeptics can snicker until they too get to Heaven.

And lastly, there is Jesus on the Cross, in the Tomb and raised from death in the Shroud of Turin. Again, there is the light: Moses and the burning bush, the Transfiguration, the near-death bright light of Heaven and the millisecond radiance of the Shroud. Biblical history is a long and winding road through our (dis-) obedience and inertia toward and away from God, since our world is constantly full of temptations. This long Biblical history goes on for many centuries in the Old Testament before being severely compressed into (perhaps) three years of Jesus' ministry, and, finally, a week for Him to testify and then die. Thus, the Bible shrinks and shrinks its time span over and over to arrive at one final, eternal portrait: Crucifixion and Resurrection. All of Jesus' healings, teachings, prophecies, rebukes to the Pharisees and His own disciples dissolve into His stumbling walk to Golgotha after being scourged and the Crown of Thorns placed upon His bleeding scalp, a cynical halo for a "king" humiliated beyond all human sense. This became the worst day in the history of the world, and it still is.

Everyone watching this tragedy unfold asked the same question: *why does Jesus not save Himself, like He saved so many others?* (*Matthew 27: 39-43*). Well, Jesus *was* saved, not by Himself, but by God, in a flash of radiant light, on the third day, as He foretold to disbelieving disciples, all but one (John) of whom abandoned Him. Jesus, the outcast among His own people, both in Nazareth and in Jerusalem----the center of Jewish law and life---was saved by the Father who sent Him to show us The Way out of our selfishness, our too-often corrupting psychology and our skepticism. *Everything* in the Bible trudges, then walks, then runs and then suddenly halts before what we never actually

see: the light in the tomb, there and then, He is gone in a flash. Jesus disappeared again, as after His miracles, as He did after seeing Mary Magdalene by the tomb, after the Upper Room, the walk to Emmaus, and, finally, forever. No more Jesus in the flesh, for *2,000 years*, for a hundred generations. No wonder we as Christians have struggled so hard in the old times and in our own---*it is so long ago*, this old story, of Jesus and of God's love for us. The good news is that we can finally give better answers to the three questions that have dogged Christianity since its beginnings: 1) how do we know that God exists?, 2) how do we know that Heaven exists? and 3) how do we know that Jesus rose from the dead? The answers come in reverse order of the questions, now bolstered by both the Shroud as well as near-death experiences.

The only answer I have is the time between Gethsemane and Easter morning, and what this means for we Christians. We can read the Bible from cover to cover a hundred times, understanding all of its concordances and scriptural nuances, but nothing quite prepares us for what suddenly comes into a place we could never go: *the Shroud-light in the tomb*, whose meaning----for others and for me----has finally revealed itself as *once every day becomes Easter*. It is the one of God's many *Amens* that matters most.

*

I close out with three poets:

*...it is enough for me forever to reflect
the hurried God who has fulfilled me.*

*But should He over-flow, let my alabaster
body be the vase to hold Him---*

*or let Him contemplate me as the shepherd
contemplates the star about to rise.¹⁸*

*

*a man on a winter road walking there is no decoding him
the cipher of his passage is impeccable the wind
is the dog at his feet the wind is the cat in his arms
the wind is the breath that powers his walking*

*I can hear nothing of him I can understand nothing
but when I see him on the road there is a walking
begins then inside me a hurrying in starlight a sunrise
over frozen roads a midday scandal of luminous rushing¹⁹*

*

*. . . Let Him live
on the borders of our Father-less gluttony*

*as long as God only anciently matters
for those who weekly study His purpose,
starving in numbers over our lifetimes
to close churches & thus neuter the clergy,
let the rest of us wander thru His world
of still-beautiful ache & ruin*

¹⁸ from "Two Poems" by Rilke, Rainer Maria. In *The Complete French Poems*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 1986 (translation by A. Poulin, Jr.).

¹⁹ from "The Emptying" by Kelly, Robert. In *Spiritual Exercises*. Santa Barbara, California: Black Sparrow Press, 1981.

in our nagging ambage to be Godly adopted----
we are still what He desires, whether today
or at the edge of no flaring forever,
rubbing dead leaves across our faces
& hiding our genitals in no sin-less garden
*to strangle all the serpents & kneel at last.*²⁰

(written: November 2014---January 2015)

²⁰ from “His Patience Our Constellation,” by Williams, Marc.
written: October 2014 (unpublished).



Once Every Day Becomes Easter aims to hone the beginnings of a new consensus toward bridging Christianity with science, medicine, and our own psychology to revive the truth that we belong to God and not only ourselves, and to work through the personal issues of forging a muscular faith in our Lord. Beyond the old ways of idol worship, circumcision, and religious laws lies a richer way from God and not ourselves: His Holy Mystery.

Once Every Day Becomes Easter

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