

Why Every Christian Should ‘Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist’

by
Jon Stanley

“Only an Atheist can be a good Christian.” -Ernst Bloch

“Only a Christian can be a good Atheist.” -Jürgen Moltmann

“I quite rightly pass for an Atheist” -Jacques Derrida

On Passing for an Atheist Along With Derrida

When the late French post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) confessed, “I quite rightly pass for an atheist,”¹ it raised quite a stir—to say the least. This was not the first of Derrida’s devilishly pithy comments, but it remains one of his most provocative. Some have interpreted it as a veiled reference to being either an atheist or a theist—a final coming clean, coming out, or getting off the fence, as it were. And those who take it this way either celebrate the fact that Derrida has come out on “our side” or lament that the fact that he has gone to the “dark side.” Of course, the response is dependent upon which side of the fence one happens to be standing, and which side one interprets Derrida as leaning. It should be no surprise then that celebration and lamentation, and name-calling and praise, can be found in both atheistic and theistic camps. After all, Derrida has been called both a “heretic” and a “saint” by atheist and theist alike.

Humans have a penchant for categorization and classification. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this. In fact, it can be quite a pleasurable and beneficial activity. Witness a child classifying a group of images of barnyard animals “according to their kind.” Not only does this bring the child a certain amount of pleasure (they often giggle as they classify), but it is also an exercise that furthers their ability to navigate their world. Not only so that when they go to the zoo for the first time they do not step into the pig pen with a handful of corn ready to feed “the chickens,” but so that it helps them to grow in the conceptual skills that will provide them with the street-wisdom they need to find their way through all the zoos of life. Thank God for child’s play!

When it comes to classifying, it seems that out of all the things to classify in God’s creation, nothing gives us more pleasure than classifying other people—as this, that, or the other. Once again, this can be both quite harmless, and quite good. Consider the pleasure that comes from recognizing and honoring cultural differences, and the benefit of being able to discern which “kinds” of people we want to entrust ourselves to in friendship. However, as we all know, there can be a dark side to classifying people as well. The pleasure of classification can become quite devilish when we are overcome by the desire to rigidly group people along hard lines, and lump them into categories that do not quite suit them.²

In postmodern lingo, such sweeping and blunt categorization represents the failure to honor the “singularity” (or one-of-a-kindness) of the individual, the reduction of her “alterity” (or

otherness) to categories with which we are already familiar, and the obfuscation of the “irreducible mystery” that each person ultimately is—even to ourselves. However, the notion that every person (indeed, every-thing) is irreducibly mysterious has a place in the history of thought long before the postmoderns came on the scene. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine writes: “But I beg you, O Lord my God, to look upon me and listen to me. Have pity on me and heal me, for you see that I have become a problem [or question] to myself.”³ The ethical implication of this epistemological (and anthropological) insight is that if we are ultimately even “mysteries to ourselves,” then we should be all the more careful in our classification of others, and in our claims to know who they “really are” and what they are “all about.”⁴

I am reminded of the time my grandfather came to live with my parents after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. During that time my mother would “check in” with my grandfather daily to see how far his illness was progressing. One morning during breakfast she asked him quite directly, “Grandpa Dewey, do you know who I am?” His response was of the sort that our family has since come to describe as “classic grandpa Dewey.” In his thick southern drawl, he incredulously replied, “Lady, if you don’t know who you are, then how in the hell am I supposed to know.” My grandfather, who never made it past grade school, and never learned to read, had in one line summed up Augustine’s notion more succinctly than any postmodern theoretician I have ever read.

Now, we might characterize that burning desire to penetrate the mystery of the other person and know who they “really are,” as a case of “classification fever,”⁵ and our age seems to be suffering from it in epidemic proportions. Interestingly, it seems that this fever rages more strongly in different areas of life. For example, we are all familiar with the saying, “Never talk about religion and politics over dinner!” (Yet it may be the best time because you can always throw food if it comes to that.) I would argue that this has become the “conventional wisdom” of the day because religion and politics are two areas where classification fever burns the hottest.

Perhaps we will tolerate some level of ambiguity when it comes to politics. After all, it may be perfectly legitimate to be authentically “torn” between being either a Republican or a Democrat (and the Independent vote is becoming an increasingly viable position). But this level of ambivalence is rarely tolerated when it comes to religion. Being torn between being an atheist or a theist, or confessing one’s uncomfortability with the categories themselves, is usually interpreted as either weak-willed, weak-minded, or both. The “American spirit” has been summed up in the motto “Don’t fence me in!” but this plea is rarely respected in the case of religion. When it comes to religion, “We want tall sturdy fences and we do not want anyone riding them, so you better get off, thank you very much!” There is something in us that just demands to know “at the end of the day,” and “after a thousand qualifications,” whether one is either a “theist” or an “atheist.” And as the arguments fly back and forth between atheists and theists in the attempt to prove the existence or non-existence of God on talk-radio, in the op-ed’s, and in *The New York Times*’ Bestseller List, the fever is catching on.

Yet, it is precisely this raging curiosity that Derrida would not satisfy with a straightforward answer. For those suffering from classification fever, it would have been so comforting if he had simply said either, “I am a theist,” or “I am an atheist,” but instead he offered this subtle and suggestive credo, “I quite rightly pass for an atheist.” Perhaps he was attempting to “break” the

fever.

Derrida himself speaks of “my religion about which nobody understands anything”⁶ and I will take him at his word. Notice the similar sentiment in the words of Saint Augustine, who, even after over three hundred pages of spiritual-autobiography, confesses:

But many people who know me, and others who do not know me but have heard of me or read my books, wish to hear what I am now, at this moment, and yet it is in my heart that I am whatever I am. So they wish to listen as I confess what I am in my heart, into which they cannot pry by eye or ear or mind. They wish to hear and they are ready to believe; but can they really know me?⁷

Once again, if both Augustine and Derrida ultimately remain “a question to themselves,” then all the more (in the words of my grandfather), “How in the hell are we supposed to know who they are.”

Further, Derrida has continually drawn attention to the “porous boundaries” between atheism and theism. He speaks 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.”⁸ One gets the sense of Derrida’s uncomfotability with the categories, and though he is no champion of the “American spirit,” at least with respect to religion, one can read between the lines a certain, “Don’t fence me in!” This is all the more reason it would be odd to take Derrida’s comment as any kind rubber stamp on the typical way the lines between atheism and theism have been drawn, let alone as an unqualified endorsement of one over the other. In fact, speaking of those who rustle through his writings trying to find evidence to peg him as either a theist or an atheist, Derrida notes how “strange” it is to him that “they situate me everywhere among the two.”⁹

So, rather than joining the inquisition that demands to know whether at the end of the day Derrida was either this or that (I will leave that to those with classification fever), following John Caputo, I would like to take a different tack on Derrida’s comment. Caputo suggests that rather than making either a veiled atheistic or theistic claim, Derrida is drawing attention to the “structure of belief/unbelief” itself, as that which always underlies any particular claim, including atheistic and theistic claims. In this way, Derrida was avoiding and critiquing the “dogmatism” that applies equally to any “strong atheistic” or “strong theistic” claim that fails to honor the fact that whatever one believes, belief and unbelief are always inextricably linked.¹⁰ While this may at first sound like an affront to believing ears, Derrida (or at least Caputo’s gloss on Derrida) is actually echoing a very biblical notion. In biblical terms, authentic faith is not characterized by the denial of one’s doubt and unbelief, but by acknowledging it (dare I say, embracing it), and praying along with the father of the boy who had just been healed by Jesus, “I believe, I don’t believe, help my unbelief.”¹¹

For a Christian to confess that she “quite rightly pass[es] for an atheist” is to admit that she does not make a good “true believer” (the kind of sure-footed believer that has no tolerance for doubt), and that that is a very good thing. But not being a good “true believer” does not mean that one cannot “believe truly,” which includes being honest about one’s unbelief, and which provides one’s life with a proper confidence—one that corresponds not to a knowledge characterized by rational certainty but to a knowledge characterized by faith. That is, a “faith-knowledge,”

qualified by "trust," and trust always demands a certain level of "risk." "I (don't) believe, help my unbelief." This is the prayer of the one who believes truly, and it is in this sense that a confessing Christian can admit that at times she "quite rightly pass[es] for an atheist."

But Caputo highlights another dimension of Derrida's devilish little comment. Caputo hears echo's of Kierkegaard in Derrida. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish (Christian) philosopher who would never refer to himself as "a Christian" per se, not because it would have been more accurate to refer to himself as something else (an atheist, agnostic, or Buddhist, for example), but because he would only go so far as to say he was in the process of "becoming a Christian." As Kierkegaard writes:

If I must be candid, I do not deny that I am not a Christian in the New Testament sense; if I must be honest, I do not deny that my life cannot be called an effort in the direction of what the New Testament calls Christianity, in the direction of denying myself, renouncing the world, dying from it, etc.; rather the earthly and the temporal become more and more important to me with every year I live.¹²

This confessional is quite personal, but it is also much more than that. Kierkegaard suggests that this is what "every single [Christian] individual" would say if he were "honest enough with God and with himself."¹³ The hints of an ascetic and world-avertive spirituality aside, the point remains that for Kierkegaard what it means to be a Christian is to orient one's life-effort in a particular direction¹⁴—"in the direction of what the New Testament calls Christianity," or becoming like Christ. Furthermore, if every Christian were honest they would have to admit that even on their best day they do not make a very good one.

For Kierkegaard, the virtues that characterize the life of the one who recognizes they are always "becoming Christian" are "humility" and "rigor" (the humility of admitting that we have not fully arrived at Christ-likeness, and the rigor of the whole-hearted pursuit of becoming like Christ). Contrast these virtues with the vices of "pride" and "sloth" that characterize the life of the one who confesses to having arrived at "being a Christian." In this way, we might see Bonhoeffer's critique of the "German Christians" cheapening of grace as echoing Kierkegaard's critique of the Christendom of his day. Both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer were all too aware of the danger of Christians who fail to acknowledge that they are always in process, and that grace must never be pitted against the humble-effort that becoming more like Christ requires.

Caputo interprets Derrida's vigilance in denying "being" this, that, or whatever, by way of Kierkegaard's vigilance in honoring the fact that he was always in the process of "becoming." Now, this is not to say that Derrida was admitting to "becoming a Christian." (Though like Kierkegaard he does recognize the inauthenticity and danger of the "true believer" suffering from arrested development by claiming to have arrived at a final religious conclusion, interpretation, or state of the journey.) Rather, once again, Derrida was drawing attention to the "structure of religious faith" and the "formula for religious confession." Whether one identifies with being a theist, atheist, agnostic, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Jew, one is always in the process of "becoming" whatever one claims to "be."

Once again, this is a sentiment with which Christians should be very familiar. Thus, if we can confess with the Apostle Paul that in striving to become like Christ we "press on toward that which we have not obtained,"¹⁵ then I believe that in the presence of those who claim to have

"arrived," the Christian who "believes truly" will "quite rightly" pass for less than a "true believer." And once again, that is a very good (and very biblical) thing! As Caputo writes, "Might it be that the best formula available to believers who are sensitive to the complex and multiple forces that are astir within us, as we all should be, is to claim that at most they 'rightly pass' for a believer? Is this not an excellent formula for whatever we believe or do not believe?"¹⁶

In our current religiously charged atmosphere, where the fever for religious classification runs strong, and where the inquiry into one's religious identity is often (quite literally) a "loaded" question, we could learn something from (Caputo's gloss on) Derrida's comment. Given Derrida's account of the structure of religious faith and the formula for religious confession, whatever we (as theists, atheists, agnostics, Christians, Muslims, or Jews) happen to "believe" we must admit that we are always both "believers and unbelievers." And whatever we claim to "be" we must admit that are always in the process of "becoming." Pace Kierkegaard, Derrida, and Caputo, given today's environment perhaps the most honest and wise way to answer the question, "Are you a Believer?" is to say, "I'd really like to be, but I 'quite rightly' pass for an unbeliever," even as we pray, "I believe, help my unbelief."

On Passing for Atheists Along With the Early Christians

But there is yet another way that I think any Christian can authentically confess to "quite rightly pass for an atheist." In fact, I would go so far as to say that every Christian should be (miss)taken for an atheist. Now, before the inquisitors begin to build their brush piles and gather their tinder, let me confess that I am speaking of being taken for an atheist in a certain sense and for a particular reason. And on this point I take my cue from the reputation of the early Christians within the Roman Empire. This may come as a surprise to many (Christians and non-Christians alike), but the early Christians were commonly referred to by others as "atheists," and I would argue that not enough has been made of this. There are important insights to be gleaned from this little known fact of Christian history, not only for the contemporary dialogue between confessing Christians and confessing Atheists, but also for the Church's reflection on its social, political, economic practice (or "way of life"), and its diagnosis of, and resistance to, the idols of our time.

Obviously, the way to begin to trace the outlines of early Christianity is through an examination of the Scriptures. However, also of significance are the various accounts of Christians by those outside the Christian community. For example, between AD 106 and 114, when Pliny the Younger¹⁷ was governor of Bithynia (a state in Asia Minor), he encountered the problem of having large numbers of people brought before him on "charges" of being Christian. Not knowing what to do about this (as it would still be another ten years or so until the rules for the persecution of Christians would be standardized throughout the empire), he wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan explaining his preliminary course of action and asking for further guidance: I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue . . . and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ.¹⁸ Pliny also included an account of the characteristics of these early Christians gathered from his observations:

They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternatively amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless, kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your [i.e. Trajan's] instructions, which banned all political societies. This made me decide that it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried out to extravagant lengths.¹⁹

As Pliny's letter to Trajan reveals, the fundamental charge leveled against the Christians was their refusal to pray to the Roman deities and to participate in emperor worship. The further link between the early Christians' refusal to participate in standard forms of emperor worship and their designation as "atheists" can be witnessed in the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna, and disciple of the Apostle John), which took place around AD 155:

There was a great uproar of those who heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore when he was brought forward the Pro-Consul asked him if he were Polycarp, and when he admitted it he tried to persuade him to deny [his Christian faith], saying: "Respect your age," and so forth, as they are accustomed to say: "Swear by the genius [or personified deity] of Caesar, repent, and say: 'Away with the Atheists.'"²⁰

As the account of Polycarp's martyrdom demonstrates, Christians were persecuted and killed because their ultimate allegiance was to Jesus rather than Caesar. Put simply, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord was to simultaneously proclaim that Caesar was not, which was tantamount both to treason and blasphemy within the empire. It is for this reason that the early Christians were referred to as "atheists," that is, they were atheistic with respect to the official religion of the Roman Empire and all that it entailed.

Further, if "logic" concerns "what follows" (in this case what follows from one's ultimate allegiance or commitment) then we can say that the Christians' lifestyle ran counter to the "imperial logic"—the lifestyle consistent with emperor worship and imperial expectation. Refusing to pay homage to Caesar as "the son of god" was enough to warrant persecution in itself, but it was the different understanding of what it meant to be human (and the way this took form in their communal life) that followed from this religious stance that unnerved the guardians of empire to such an extent that they went to such extreme measures of persecution as they did.

Now, it is important to note just what the Christians were actually doing that warranted their designation as a degenerate atheistic cult. It is not that they exposed their children to the practice of pederasty and participated in sexual orgies in the context of cultic worship (as the Romans did). It is not that they attempted to overthrow the government through violent revolution (as the Zealots did). It is not that they defecated on public sidewalks and committed suicide as a form of public protest (as the Cynics did). And it is not that they restricted their benevolence to their family and/or their ethnic community (as was standard practice throughout the empire). Rather, as Aristides notes:

Their oppressors they appease and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies. . . . they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a

very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and of God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial.²¹

The early Christians were accused of being an “atheistic cult” not because they were doing things that we would recognize today as degenerate (quite the opposite), but because their total way of life, interpersonally, communally, and within society at large, was out of step with the *morés* (from where we get the term “morality”), or cultural conventions/expectations of their day—what I have previously referred as the “logic of the empire,” or the “imperial way of life.”

One of the fascinating features of early Christianity is that within a few decades after the crucifixion of its founder at the hands of the Romans, the early Christians had managed to distinguish their “communal life and public practice”—what I would refer to collectively as their “way” (of life)—from every other community in the Roman Empire.²² Aristides’ account could not be said of the Stoicism and Cynicism of the philosophical schools, the paganism and the mystery cults of popular Roman religion, or any of the various forms of either second-Temple or Rabbinical Judaism. As N. T. Wright argues, “What we seem to be faced with is the existence of a community which was perceived to be subverting the normal social and cultural life of the empire precisely by its quasi-familial, quasi-ethnic life as a community. . . . It was a new family, a ‘third race,’ neither Jew nor Gentile but ‘in Christ.’ Its very existence threatened the foundational assumptions of pagan society.”²³ Wright continues, “What evokes persecution is precisely that which challenges a worldview, that which up ends a symbolic universe.”²⁴ In their total way of life, from their symbolic actions (e.g. refusing to participate in emperor worship) to their social practices (e.g. hospitality that transcended religious, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries) the early Christians were challenging the assumptions of empire, and embodying a new way of being human that was out of step with the imperial logic. This is the most plausible explanation of why the early Christians faced such intense persecution, and why they were commonly referred to as “atheists” within the Roman Empire.

I trust that you see where I am heading. If Christians today are to “quite rightly” pass for atheists (as I believe all Christians should) in the sense that this term was applied to the early Christians, then we must begin by asking two questions. First, What are the analogies to Roman emperor worship in our own historical moment? We must begin to analyze the reigning “gods of our age,” those ideologies demanding our ultimate allegiance, and denounce them in sacrilegious fashion (indeed, in atheistic fashion) as the “idols of our time.”

Speaking as an American to Americans, in order to begin the process of ideological identification and critique, I suggest that we take a second-look at the “isms” that are characteristic of the “American way of life.” “Isms” (in the sense that I will develop as “good things gone bad”) are revelatory of the idoloc tendencies of a society as a whole, and in this sense they get at the idols we all live in witting and unwitting obedience to, whether we come from a Red state or a Blue state, or consider ourselves Liberals or Conservatives. In other words, when it comes to ideology (or what we might think of as “societal idolatry”), Left, Right, or Center, we all worship at the same altar.

The identification of the “idols of our time” is serious business, and with limited space for argumentation, the best I can do is to refer to the work of those I am drawing upon²⁵ as I suggest

that any diagnosis of the most problematic "isms" of our day and age should include, at minimum: nationalism (the pursuit of national interest and national security at any cost), technologism (the pursuit of scientific knowledge and technological advancement at any cost), and economism (the pursuit of profit and economic expansion at any cost). Now, I do not mean to imply that these pursuits are bad in and of themselves. It is rather their pursuit "at any cost" (which gives them their god-like status) that I am specifically critiquing. National identity and national security, scientific discovery and technological progress, and capital growth and economic profit, when properly related to other creaturely priorities will most likely be a part of any good world that we can imagine. However, when these creaturely phenomena are turned into "isms"—when they are absolutized and treated as objects of ultimate and unqualified allegiance that we obey "at any cost"—they stop serving Life (in its richest and most comprehensive sense) and instead become agents of Death. Having said this, we would do well to pause and reflect upon the kind of world these "gods" have bestowed on us, or I should say, the kind of world we have created in our submission to them—a world characterized by escalating violence and the rise of the military industrial machine, human alienation from nature and vast environmental degradation, the threat of nuclear destruction and biological weaponry, the commodification of reality where people become reduced to things in a market where every-thing has a price, and a rapidly widening gap between the world's rich and the world's poor—and ask ourselves whether the "gods of our age" are as benevolent as we have taken them to be, and if they are truly worthy of our service.

And secondly, What does it mean to be truly human? We must begin to explore new ways of being human that run counter to current imperial expectation—the "conventional wisdom" determined for us by the "gods of our age"—and that are instead animated by the biblical vision of a world characterized by justice, solidarity, and the full flourishing of all God's creatures (both human and non-human). I should say, that while I am specifically addressing the way in which a Christian can "pass for an atheist" by denouncing contemporary ideologies, I also assume that Christians have much to learn from those who would identify themselves explicitly as atheist, or what I would call "confessing atheists."

My spouse and I are close friends with a couple that professes to be atheists. They are very good people who love justice and care deeply about the world, and we have learned much about how to live more creatively and compassionately through our friendship with them. From this experience I can say that Christians would do well to extend the dialogue beyond familiar borders and listen to as many people as possible in their attempt to discern what it means to live well as human beings in a complex world. This is not just a specifically Christian question, but a very human question, and though centuries of Christian reflection certainly does provide us with a plethora of insights and resources to bring the table, perhaps Christians should focus more on inviting and hosting a hospitable conversation where wisdom can be shared freely rather than attempting to provide the answer themselves.²⁶ What it means to be fully and truly human in our time always comes to us as an open question, and in a very important sense, in spite of (and yet without wanting to flatten out) our very real religious differences, we really are "all in it together" when it comes to crafting a more just and peaceable future.²⁷

I have no doubt that any person or community that begins to take these questions to heart will begin to feel the pressure, if not the outright persecution, of "the powers that be"—those who

stand to gain the most from keeping things exactly the way they currently are.²⁸ “Away with the Atheists,” they will say, as they did with the Christian Bishop Polycarp, of all those who refuse to bend the knee and pay homage to the "gods" of nationalism, technologism, and economism, to name a few from the contemporary pantheon.²⁹ And it is in this sense, after a rigorous critique of the idols and ideologies of our time, and a re-imagining of what it means to live truly human (and humane) lives, that every Christian should “quite rightly pass for an atheist.”

In(con)clusion

Now, for those still suffering from a case of classification fever I will offer a subtle and suggestive Christian credo of my own.

Am I an atheist? Well, if that means one who no longer desires God and testifies to the reality of God in my life, and one who has given up on the hope of the name of God and the naming of God being significant for human life, then, “No, I am not an atheist.” But if that means one who is suspicious of the gods of our age (as the idols of our time), and sensitive to the way in which our submission to them leads to injustice and makes life on earth a "living hell" for many, then, “Yes, I quite rightly pass for an atheist.”

And am I a theist? Well, if that means feeling the need to subscribe to the theological doctrines and moral conventions that go by the name “orthodoxy,” and if historically any "theism" (particularly "classical theism") has always been some form of "deism" (the belief in a distant, dispassionate, and authoritarian supreme being),³⁰ then, “No, I am not a theist.” But if it refers to the wholehearted allegiance to God and God’s good creation, and if this translates into a desire for God that is simultaneously a desire for justice, and a love of God that is simultaneously a love of neighbor,³¹ then, “Yes, I quite rightly pass for a theist.”

As you can see, like Augustine, I am truly “a question to myself.” But at least I am in good company!

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in *Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida*, Jacques Derrida (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993). The citation is worth including in full: “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,” pp. 154-55.
2. One example of when classification becomes particularly devilish is in the case of "demonization," which occurs when someone is categorized as evil and therefore identified with evil per se. For example, no matter how much they were at odds ideologically, one gets the sense that George Bush’s naming of Sadaam Hussein as an “Evil dictator” and Sadaam Hussein’s naming of George Bush as the “great Satan,” were both instances of demonization rather than

helpful categorization.

3. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961) Book X.33, p. 239 [my emphasis].

4. For a sampling of the way in which Augustine's notion that we are "questions to ourselves" has been taken up in contemporary postmodern philosophical hermeneutics and philosophical ethics, respectively, see John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000) and Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (London: Harvester Press, 1991).

5. Of course, I am playing on Derrida's notion of "archive fever," which is part of his critique of the Freudian tradition of psychoanalysis for its compulsion to discover "the origin," which might be more popularly referred to as the founding event (or founding story) that would provide the magic key for unlocking the meaning of all that follows. See *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

6. Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," 154.

7. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), Book X.3, p. 209 [my emphasis].

8. See Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John Leavey Jr., and Ian Mcleod (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), especially 35-36. Here, Derrida is speaking of the apophatic tradition of negative theology.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Villanova, Prés de Philadelphia, le 26 Septembre, 1997," in *Jacques Derrida and Catherine Mallabou, La Contra-Allée* (Paris: La Quinzaine Littéraire, 1999), 99.

10. John Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 62.

11. Mark 9:24 [my paraphrase]. The NIV translation reads: "Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"

12. Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lawrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), 30.

13. Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 30.

14. One hears echoes here of Friedrich Nietzsche's notion that a worthwhile life requires an "obedience over a long period of time and in a single direction," from *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, NY: Vintage Press, 1966), 101. You might recognize this from the title (drawn from Nietzsche) of Eugene Peterson's spiritual classic *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).

15. Philippians 3:12 [my paraphrase]. The NIV translation reads: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

16. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*, 63.

17. Pliny the Younger was the nephew of the naturalist Pliny the Elder, who died while observing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. See Pliny, *Letters*, 6.16.

18. Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96, cited in N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the People of God: Volume I* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 349.

19. Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96, cited in Wright, 349. Notice the reference to the practice, which was quite progressive for its day, of giving women ('slave-woman' no less) prominent roles of leadership within the congregational life of churches.

20. Justin Martyr, *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9.1-3, cited in Wright, 347 [my emphasis].

21. Aristides, *Apology*, 15, cited in Wright, 363.

22. For this reason Christianity was commonly referred to as the "third way," even as they commonly referred to themselves as "people of the way." I find the notion that religions are pre-theoretical and holistic "ways of life," that always exceed and should not be reduced to the "theories of life" (worldviews) or "theories of God" (theologies) that pertain to them quite helpful. For more on the notion that human beings are inescapably religious creatures and that religion encompasses and expresses itself all of life, see H. Evan Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning* (Toronto, ON: Wedge Publishing, 1970), and *Life is Religion: Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner*, ed. Henry Vander Goot (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1981).

23. Wright, 450.

24. Wright, 451.

25. My diagnosis of the "idols of our time" is very much indebted to Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984); Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vader Vennen, and David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); and Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2007).

26. For a very helpful example of a mutually illuminating dialogue between a Marxist Atheist and a Calvinist Christian that is both respectful of very real religious differences and open to a common search, see Kai Nielsen and Hendrik Hart, *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition: Conversations between a Marxian Atheist and a Calvinian Christian* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990). It is significant that in his ex-augural address as professor of

systematic philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies, Hart says of Nielsen: “you are an atheist in whom God shows me how to love and do justice to our neighbor, you came [to the ex-augural] because you care,” in Hendrik Hart, “The Spirit of God and the Times of Our Lives,” Ex-augural Address, Institute for Christian Studies, Convocation, November 30, 2001.

27. I should add that I see religious differences (and difference in general) more as "potential" than "obstacle" for the building of civic community and the search for truthfulness. I am painting in broad strokes here, but in this sense I would consider myself more "postmodern" than "modern"—the modern notion being that we can only find common ground if we leave our religious differences behind. When real differences are honored (rather than minimized) there is more collective wisdom to be shared, as we struggle with the common questions of how to live well, and live well together, in an increasingly pluralistic world.

28. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela are powerful examples of people who challenged the ideologies of their day to such an extent that "the powers that be" could no longer tolerate their existence. I would interpret the immediate historical reasons (as well as the starting point for discerning the theological meaning) for Jesus' imprisonment and crucifixion in a similar fashion. We must remember that crucifixion was the form of death reserved for "troublemakers" within the Roman Empire. Along these lines, I would see the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus articulation of a new "way of life" to his followers, a way of making "holy trouble" in the world in the name of love.

29. As I mentioned, nationalism, technologism, and economism, are my suggestions of a good place to start for a diagnosis of the idols of our time. Walsh and Middleton identify “the gods of our age” as, “scientism,” “technicism,” and “economism,” which they refer to together as the “unholy trinity.” Goudzwaard, et al., cite three “contemporary ideologies;” “unleashed identity,” “unshackled material progress and prosperity,” and “guaranteed security.” And McLaren speaks in terms of an ideological “suicide machine” that has resulted in four “global crises;” the “prosperity crisis” (which includes the "ecological crisis"), the “equity crisis,” the “security crisis,” and the “spirituality crisis.” I am very much indebted to these authors’ analyses and proposals, and I heartily recommend them, particularly for those looking for a more detailed and robust account of a Christian social vision and practice than I offer in this essay.

30. Let me reiterate my concern that the category of "theism" always smuggles in some form of "deism." Deism has its origin's in Epicurean notions of the divine, and comes to its fullest expression in the popular eighteenth-century notion of god as the “watchmaker” who fashioned creation, wound it up, and left it alone, that is, except for the occasional miraculous supernatural interruption of the laws of nature. While one who is familiar with the scriptures will immediately realize that this is a far way off from “the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus,” sadly, the majority of Christian academic and popular theology that would go by the name of "biblical theism" is (in my estimation) little more than deism with a biblical veneer.

So, can Christianity be rightly described as theistic in a way that avoids deistic overtones? While this question is beyond the limits of this paper, I will briefly say that while I have my doubts (and would instead use the language of "covenant"), if some Christians wish to continue to speak of their religion as theistic then they should be careful to do so only in a very restricted sense in

order to make a very particular point. For starters, Christianity is neither first and foremost a "theory of life" (or world-view) nor a "theory of god" (or theo-logy), but a pre-theoretical and holistic "way of life" (or religion). Theism, on the other hand, is a very specific "theory of god" (and the God/world relation). So, the reason I am hesitant to "identify" Christianity with theism is twofold. First, I do not want to reduce religion to theology (which has always been the temptation of theologians), which would represent a privileging of theoretical experience over pre-theoretical experience for no good reason other than that fact that it gives us the illusion of control over the slippery ambiguous phenomena that religions always are. Second, though it is fair to assume that certain theories (or doctrines) will more appropriately express the meaning of a particular religion than others, I do not want Christianity to be linked more closely to theism, in principle, than other theoretical ways of conceiving the God/world relation. Thus, if we are to speak of Christianity (a pre-theoretical phenomena) in theoretical terms (which is what theologians do in the very specific theoretical activity that we call "theology") then we must do so in a variety of respects. It is for this reason, that I would prefer to speak of Christianity as theistic (in a certain respect, for example, to highlight God's "otherness," or the experience of God's transcendence, when that is particularly meaningful), atheistic (in a certain respect, for example, to highlight God's "absence," or the experience of Godforsakeness, when that is particularly meaningful), pantheistic (in a certain respect, for example, to highlight God's "presence," or the experience of God's immanence, when that is particularly meaningful), and so on, knowing that because we are speaking in theoretical terms none of these categories can be identified with Christianity as such.

But, is one of these "theories of God" more appropriate to the Christian religion? Once again, not in principle. We need the theoretical dexterity and flexibility to do justice to the many different ways we experience God's presence (and lack thereof) in creation and at different points in our lives. What I would ultimately like to propose is that Christianity is best understood as a "covenantal" religion, and that from within a common-grace perspective, all the aforementioned theories of the God/world (or Creator/creature) relation (i.e. theism, atheism, pantheism, panentheism etc.) are rightly zeroing in on (but wrongly absolutizing, or de-contextualizing) particular aspects/dimensions of the God/world relation that is properly described as covenantal. Thus, while I would not describe Christianity as theistic, atheistic, or pantheistic, as such, a covenantal perspective would allow us to honor the various theistic, atheistic, and pantheistic "moments" of the Christian experience of God's presence in creation.

For two helpful discussions of the deistic streak in Christian theology, and the beginnings of a new (and more biblical) way of understanding the God/world relation, one mainline and one evangelical, see John A. T. Robinson, "The End of Theism?" chapter two, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963); and N. T. Wright, "God," chapter five, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2006).

31. This notion of "a desire for God that is simultaneously a desire for justice, and a love of God that is simultaneously a love of neighbor" is a natural way to speak about God and creation from within a covenantal perspective—one that assumes that the God of whom we speak is always "the God of creation" and the creation of which we speak is always "the creation of God." From within such a perspective it would never be appropriate to pit God (and the love of God) against creation (and the love of creation). Covenantally, by definition, to love the God of creation is to

love the creation of God, and to love the creation of God is to love the God of creation. I take this to be what Dietrich Bonhoeffer was getting at when he said that to be truly Christian is to “love God and the world in a single unity.” I also take this to be both echoing and addressing one of the most persistent critiques of Christianity by secular people and confessing Atheists alike—the notion that Christians are, to borrow a phrase, “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” From a covenantal perspective, "heavenly mindedness" and "earthly mindedness" would not be understood as mutually exclusive (as they are in both atheism and theism), but rather as mutually intensive (or intensifying). This is one way that I see the ("earthly minded") atheistic critique of ("heavenly minded") theism as providing (perhaps, providentially so) the opportunity for Christian theology to move beyond theism/deism to "covenant," and thus to a spirituality that is both grounded "in the earth" (as the creational gifts of God we are called to extend in faith) and open "to the heavens" (as the creational promises of God we are called to anticipate in hope). For more on the significance of the "heaven and earth" relationship for a covenantal spirituality, see Nicholas Ansell, “It’s About Time: Opening Our Reformational Paradigm to the Eschaton,” Paper presented at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, September 26, 2003.