

excommunicated

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Conference Overview from the President

Gregory Erickson, New York University

In June, our society held its biannual conference at NYU. This year's theme was "Heresy, Belief, and Ideology: Dissent in Politics and Religion." As the host and organizer of our conference, my actual in-real-time experience consisted mostly of riding the elevator, sending emails and texts, talking to the NYU housing office, and convincing an associate dean that having live snakes on stage in the theater would be "fine." However, in reflecting on the intellectual and social content of the conference, I can now allow myself to appreciate the events of the three days beyond the feeling of relief that the panels had rooms and Wi-Fi, that the dinner, wine, and coffee were good, that people seemed happy and engaged, that everyone had a place to sleep, and that there were no reported snakes bites.

I was very happy with the international nature of conference participants (South America, South Africa, Turkey, Britain, Finland, Germany, Canada) and the variety of subject matter. I was especially pleased that we were able to put together the opening round table discussion on the 50th anniversary of *Time* Magazine's famous "Death of God" cover with Thomas Altizer (the main theologian mentioned in the original article), Jeff Robbins, and Jordan Miller. The idea for the event was actually serendipitously cooked up just days before the conference in a Facebook conversation I had with several of our members on my phone while I was in a pub and it was—I thought—a wonderful and timely way to open the conference.

While I wasn't able to attend as many panels as I would have liked (see snakes, etc., above), the ones I did attend and the conversations between and after panels in the lobby, at the conference dinner, and at Greenwich Village pubs were lively, insightful, and rewarding. I loved hearing Tom Altizer hold forth over food and drinks surrounded by at least four generations of scholars influenced by his writing; I enjoyed a panel that featured a paper discussing Western views of Turkish theologians alongside a paper by a Turkish theologian; and I found the keynote talks and discussions by Jeff Robbins, Rebecca Goldstein, and Jim Morrow provocative and inspiring.

The International Society for Heresy Studies

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One discussion that inevitably emerges in multiple contexts surrounding the conference and our society comes out of the question of identity and definition. We began our first conference, two years ago, with an extended debate over terminology: What is heresy? What is blasphemy? We had trouble agreeing then, and we would probably have even more trouble agreeing now. Should we have a focused “mission?” Can we be large enough to include ancient, medieval, Islamic, postmodern, post secular, and atheistic viewpoints? And, if we are, is there a point where our pluralism or our diversity spreads our organization too thin or in too many directions? But after this conference, finding definitive answers to these questions seems less and less important. My view, especially after this conference, is that it is exactly *because* of the diversity of positions, that our society and conference offer something fresh and important; a space outside of disciplinary, theoretical or confessional expectations and assumptions.



Gregory Erickson, James Morrow, and a snake.

Perhaps my biggest take-away from the conference is a confirmation that as scholars, writers, and artists continue to question and complicate what “religion” or “religious” even mean, the grounds of analysis must shift as well, and commonly employed categories like unbelief and disbelief must become more fluid in meaning. Part of my own interest in religious heresy comes from a realization that to work in or with Western Literature is to necessarily enter into a dialogue *with* religion. Studying heresies and blasphemies has given me a way to both acknowledge this and to find new ways to challenge it. This conference gave me new directions in which to pursue this line of thinking, especially in the continued breaking down of the borders between “theological” and “skeptical” modes of thought. Traditional models of religious studies and religiously themed art almost required one to be for or against, to be on the inside or the outside. Although the presentations during the conference came from a variety of disciplines, faith traditions, and cultures, they all—to me, anyway—contributed to a

dialogue that moves away from these kinds of categorizations. As G.K. Chesterton wrote a century ago “Blasphemy depends upon belief. If any one doubts this, let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor.”

After the last event of the conference, when I could finally breathe a sigh of relief, a group of us headed off to Third Street Commons, a little bar two blocks away from the Gallatin School. It was literally the first line of a joke—an atheist, a Jew, a Christian, and a pagan walk into a bar. But we did. And we talked. And drank. And talked. About theology, about Black Lives Matter, about Turkish mosques, Mormon missions, the letters of Paul and the letters of James Joyce, about Broadway musicals and York mystery cycles—and about heresy and blasphemy. Keeping these multiple positions in tension and bringing them into dialogue with each other is the most fulfilling part of our conferences, for me. We are always close to pulling too far apart, to bursting at the boundaries of our defining concept, and yet we don’t. What becomes clear is that my heresy is not your heresy. But then that has always been true, hasn’t it?

An Insidious Fallacy

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, New York University & New School for the Humanities

A good conference, at least for me, gives me something to mull over. Sometimes the mulling material is a subtle fallacy I feel compelled to unpack. This was the case for me in the days following the last ISHS conference, held in New York in June.

The fallacy over which I’ve been mulling was one that I heard repeated in several of the presentations; the frequency was in itself worth pondering. But so, too, was the fallacy, which rests on conflating two quite separate meanings of the notion of religion.

On the one hand, religion is understood in its more or less conventional sense as a commitment to the belief in the existence of a transcendent God who, at a bare minimum, created the natural universe. A religious person is then—whatever else she or he might think and feel and however he or she might behave—a person who has an ontological belief of a supernatural stripe. Beyond the natural world, its constituents and its laws, there is a Something Other. A person who identifies herself as an atheist is generally understood to be disavowing the supernatural belief.

On the other hand, religion is understood as a kind of human experience of a profoundly moving and creatively generative kind. The ancient Greeks named this experience *thaumazein*, and it is best translated as ontological astonishment. In the grip of *thaumazein* every fact of being—including the existence of the world itself and the existence of oneself within it—strikes one with astonishment. The experience often has a certain ecstatic aspect, especially as ecstasy is understood in terms of its original etymology (which we also owe to the ancient Greeks), meaning to stand beside or outside of oneself.

Thaumazein is not itself a specific ontological belief but rather an emotion that has as its object *ontos*, that is “being” itself. In this sense, as well as in its ecstatic aspect, it can also be described as a transcendent experience. But it does not entail a commitment to any transcendent being. It is—as both Plato (*Theaetetus* 155d) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 982b) attest, the *beginning* of philosophy, rather than any specific philosophical conclusion.

Thaumazein is not only an experience intimate to philosophers, but to scientists and artists of all kinds. Writers, being writers, are particularly adept at finding the words to describe it. Virginia Woolf dubbed such experiences “moments of being” and attributed her artistic inspiration to them, while Jane Austen had this to say: “When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.”

Einstein sometimes called *thaumazein* the “experience of the mysterious,” writing, “It is the source of all true art and all true science.” More often he referred to it by way of Spinoza, who did indeed give deep expression to the experience, most especially in Part V of the *Ethics*, helping us there to see our way clear to a purely rationalist ecstasy, which—never taking us outside of the natural order but rather reveling in the order itself—can reconcile us even to our own inevitable mortality.

But it would be quite wrong to restrict this profoundly stirring experience to only the philosophers and scientists and artists among us. When I wrote about this experience in the first chapter of one of my novels, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, many readers—whether religious or not, whether creatively gifted or not—wrote to me that they had always wondered whether other people had such experiences. I am inclined to think it is widespread among us.

It is fine, I suppose, to appropriate the word “religion” so that it refers exclusively to these ecstatic experiences of existence. Spinoza himself did so. But if you do, then you must—as Spinoza did, as Einstein did—let go of the conventional meaning of the word “religion.”

If you conflate the two meanings, then you will be complacently drawing the unjustified conclusion that only those who believe in the supernatural can experience the profound astonishments that inspire so much that is remarkable about our species. And what then of the non-believers who lay claim to the experience? Either they are, poor souls, confused believers, and so I heard various thinkers analyzed at the conference as “paradoxically” both rejecting God’s existence and yet knowing the experience of ecstasy. Or they are something far worse—stunted creatures incapable of stepping outside themselves and experiencing the sheer exhilaration and gratitude before *ontos*. Are they then even fully human, you might then find yourself wondering? And then you are on dangerous ground. I’m happy to report nobody at the conference seemed to want to go there. But it’s not such a great distance away, once you conflate the two meanings of ‘religion.’

Something Different

Jeremy Carnes, Lindenwood University

While I was watching three adults lounging meditatively on the floor in the company of two large snakes, I had a vague sense that this was an unusual proceeding at an academic conference. But only a vague one. In truth, I had already accepted that, at the conferences of the International Society for Heresy Studies, the exceptional is the normal. Why not herpetological meditation? The unorthodox is our specialty.

I remember being surprised during the planning for our first conference in 2014 when I learned that a concert was on our conference program. A concert? At an academic conference? That seemed rather frivolous. It was only after I attended the concert—which was a fantastic performance by Ellery—that it occurred to me how wrongheaded my initial reaction had been. Why *wouldn’t* we have art at a conference on the academic study of art and literature? Why don’t *all* humanities conferences have direct experiences with art on their agendas? Suddenly it was academic conference orthodoxy that seemed unintelligible. Somehow the professional gatherings whose ostensible purpose was to share the value of the study of art had left art out of the mix.

But ISHS does things differently. Much of what I value about our organization lies in that defiance of orthodoxy. So, yes, we had snakes at our second conference (on top of another fine concert by Jack Holloway, aka Temple Autonomy). We had panels made up of people working in highly disparate fields, whose papers nevertheless spoke to each other in exciting and productive ways. We addressed head-on topics that many scholars shy away from, hedge around, or arrogantly dismiss (That same boldness of inquiry can be seen in our Society’s publication, *exCommunicated*, where we take our often obscure, uncomfortable subject matter and disseminate it freely online). Above all, we have a sense of purpose—something I feel that is troublingly absent from most of the academic organizations I am a part of.

The greatest personal benefit I have derived from being a part of the Society is that it has pushed me to also “do things differently.” At this conference, I was part of a panel on “Heresy and Television”: an unusual place for an eighteenth-centuryist like myself to be. I also reviewed the first season of *Lucifer* in this issue of *exCommunicated*. It is all too easy for scholars to slip into the relative safety of researching only within their field, of writing only what will help to build their tenure portfolio. Such safety is antithetical to the spirit of exploration and provocation that I felt among the attendees of our conference.

Subverting the Script

**Bernard Schweizer, Long Island University,
Brooklyn**

Among the highlights of this past conference for me were the moments when the conference departed from the tried-and-true protocol of the common academic conference. This happened, for instance, when a new format such as the keynote *conversation* between Rebecca Newberger Goldstein and James Morrow proved to be an utterly captivating event, or when the sparks began to fly during a Q&A session over the implications of celibacy for child abuse, and again when a conference participant brought a couple of pythons as part of her keynote act.

Since we are a Society for Heresy Studies, I expect some subversion of the norm and some departure from the familiar. The keynote conversation between James Morrow and Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, which I had the honor of moderating, was a great example of this. What a delightful event to have these two exceedingly bright creative writers and sophisticated thinkers engage each other on matters of heresy, blasphemy, orthodoxy, and subversion in a non-scripted manner. For me, this was the quintessence of intellectual fun. For instance, both James and Rebecca enabled us to grasp how the abstract ideas of novelists are anchored in their lived experience. We could learn how Rebecca Goldstein's philosophical turn of mind and her fictional interests were shaped by the fact that she encountered orthodoxies during her entire lifetime, from her youth in a Yeshiva to studying and teaching in academic philosophy departments. Rather than letting herself be shaped by them, she realized that "nothing rubs me the wrong way like being told I must not ask certain questions."

James Morrow revealed that at age 27 he felt "possessed" by an idea for a story that was to become his first novel, *Wine of Violence*, and he revealed the large impact that Voltaire has had on his thinking and writing. Goldstein made another fascinating revelation when she explained that "I got some of my best ideas from my fictional characters" —ponder the meaning of this statement for a moment! Morrow, on the other hand, pointed out that despite his secular-humanist convictions, paradoxically, "without God I would be unemployed." It was fascinating to have this chance to peek into the mental laboratory of two of today's important novelists-of-ideas. How well this event was received could be gauged by the lively and extended discussion that followed it, as well as by the continuing conversations during the reception after the event.

Another unconventional event, however, did not fare quite so well in the audience reaction. I had personally invited a significant contemporary avant-garde artist from Germany, Antonija Livingstone, to give a talk and a performance at our conference. She characterizes her work as a form of "punk choreography," and she is currently working on a new

performance piece titled "etude hérétiques." She was interested in our society because the ISHS professes to explore intersections between art and scholarship from the perspective of heresy. Not only had she come across the Atlantic to be with us, but she had arranged a rather expensive set of props to be presented at her talk and performance: two large snakes.



Jeffrey W. Robbins, Antonija Livingstone, and a snake.

OK, I was not prepared for the latter, although I suspected that she'd do something disruptive since this is her stock-in-trade. The rumor quickly spread in the lobby that something unusual was afoot, but rather than piquing people's interest, as I had hoped and expected, it seemed that the specter of something unruly and heterodox contributed to driving most people away. We ended up with an audience of eight people for this keynote event! I was wondering what made the large majority of the conference attendees stay away from such a potentially heretical event? Was it because they did not know the artist and lacked curiosity to find out? Was it bad timing? Was it herpetophobia? Was the offering not "academic" enough?

My point is that here was a chance to witness the breaking of the conventional conference script, to hear German hand-bells ring out in an incantatory circle, and to appreciate the opportunity of having a Burmese Python curling around one's neck. In other words: here was a chance to see something eccentric and to hear a voice that speaks to us from outside the academic comfort zone. And yet, I can only repeat it: the level of interest in this offering was disappointing (of course, I give kudos to those 8 die-hards who did stick around!).

I am a great believer in thinking as doing or "applied philosophy." In order to have an experiential understanding of what heresy is, it doesn't hurt to get involved in activities that involve boundary challenging and norm breaking. It doesn't have to be snake-handling at an academic conference, but then again, that would be one way of feeling a bit like a heretic, if only for a limited time.

Reflections and a Proposal

John Daniel Holloway, III, Union Theological Seminary

At the 2016 Heresy Studies conference I was particularly struck by Jeff Robbins' discussion of what it might mean to be a heretic today. He first looked at the example of Spinoza, who was condemned as a heretic. What qualities did this event have that can be found today? Robbins emphasized two: loneliness and sacrifice. A heretic is one who espouses something that alienates her and costs her. A heretic is an outcast, one who occupies a negative space, rejected on more than one front. A heretic is also someone who suffers for what she espouses. Robbins offered Pier Paolo Pasolini as a potential heretic today. I suggest Ariel Pink to be another.

the music, but that does not stop them from despising (or at least objecting to) the person. His purpose (if he can be said to have one) is, for better or for worse, to be subversive to a P.C. culture that claims the moral high ground and polices speech. What I thought about when I was listening to Robbins' lecture was that the most hated man in the indie rock world—a world characterized by hypersensitive reactionism—takes up a heretical position. It has, as Robbins says of the heretic, cost Pink a lot, taking a toll on his life and career. Pink, like Pasolini, stands alone, and without defense.

That heretics are cool seemed to be a common sentiment at the Heresy Studies conference (and, generally, you wouldn't look to me to contradict it). Pink, however, gives us an example of a heretic who may actually not be cool. While the subversive role is a much-needed one, heretics give us no guarantee that we're going to like the way they play it.

Conference Reflections

James Morrow, novelist

I came away from the second ISHS conference largely exhilarated, mildly exasperated, bracingly exhausted, and blessed with a newfound appreciation for the scholarly way of being in the world. Needless to say, my loopy historical novel-in-progress about the Council of Nicaea received a healthy infusion of subversive ideas.

Today, June 23, happens to be Johannes Gutenberg's birthday, and before sundown I shall raise a glass not only to the inventor of moveable type, but to everyone who gave presentations earlier this month. Obviously I'm not alone in wishing I could have bifurcated myself and thereby attended every session. I hope we can make all the papers available through some post-Gutenberg technology or other.

Now let me express a reservation. It seems to me that when we attempt to rehabilitate outspoken unbelievers, whether Friedrich Nietzsche, Virginia Woolf, the late Christopher Hitchens, or the cutups who style themselves the Satanic Temple (I'm alluding to some of the presentations I caught), recasting their projects in sociological, psychological, or "spiritual" terms, we are doing these audacious thinkers no favors.

I keep returning to a line I like in Article II of the ISHS bylaws: "The Society also encourages scholarship on non-God centric secular visions, and it fosters inquiries into atheist critiques of theism." (I realize, of course, that the term "heresy" is by no means synonymous with unbelief and often points to intense varieties of religious experience.) As we all know, there is no shortage of scholars adept at finding tacit metaphysical assumptions in materialist, atheist, antitheist, and misotheist thought. But I believe ISHS is about something else. Let us not lose our edge. Let us not domesticate our heretics. Let us risk excommunication.



Jeffrey W. Robbins delivering his keynote address.

Ariel Pink is an experimental pop musician. In addition to being a musical genius, he is known as "the most hated man of indie rock." This is because of the way he has presented himself to the world. His philosophy is to "get in touch with your weird." In Ariel Pink's life, this has often manifested itself in outlandish and offensive statements in interviews, on stage, and on social media. Pink, says a writer for *The Guardian*, not only deviates from the artist's script of kneejerk liberalism, but rips it up entirely, which has led him into strange territory. "It's not illegal to be an asshole," he says, in response to a question concerning misogynistic comments he made when he recalled being maced by a feminist. He had initially responded to the accusation by tweeting, "What if I committed suicide and tweeted, 'Thank you, guys. You were right'?" Pink has also playfully criticized homosexuals for wanting to get married, and has flippantly dismissed activist groups.

It is difficult when encountering certain statements from Pink not to think of Donald Trump (a comparison Pink might actually invite!). However, Pink seems less invested in what he's saying, and he says it with an understanding that he does not have a substantial group of defenders. His fans may like

In Defense of Jan Böhmermann, Germany's Satirical *Enfant Terrible*

Bernard Schweizer, Long Island University, Brooklyn

Germany is currently rocked by a controversy of the first order, and it's all because of a bit of satire. Germany satirical *enfant terrible* Jan Böhmermann had recited a "poem" deliberately insulting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In response, Erdoğan has provoked a bilateral crisis between Turkey and Germany, calling for the prosecution and punishment of the comedian under German law, thereby putting German Chancellor Angela Merkel in an awkward in regard to the freedom of satire and the license of flyting.

Turkish cooperation with Germany is crucial right now in trying to control the flow of migrants across Europe, and this brouhaha could wreck the whole edifice of agreements negotiated between the EU and Turkey. Meanwhile, Angela Merkel has agreed to let legal proceedings against Böhmermann go forward, sparking outrage and prompting a national debate about the meaning of press freedom, freedom of conscience, and the limits of acceptable speech.

What happened is this: during a recent installment of his satirical program "Neo Magazin Royal," sitting in front of a projection of the Turkish flag and a framed portrait of the Turkish president, Böhmermann proceeded to read a "poem" titled "Schmähkritik" ("Defamatory Criticism").

The poem is a thoroughly sophomoric concoction of doggerel heaping just about all imaginable sexual, anatomical, and ideological scorn upon the Turkish President, accusing him of everything from pederasty to bestiality to crimes against humanity, while making unflattering comments about the size of his male equipment. Exaggeration and pure insult seem the only point of Böhmermann's verses, and this has earned Böhmermann considerable criticism, even from his own fans and supporters.

This part of the debate has a familiar ring to it: weren't we treated last year to opinions like Gary Trudeau's who critiqued Charlie Hebdo's religious caricatures as too crude and deliberately insulting to a whole population and therefore unpardonable? By a similarly twisted logic, Böhmermann is also accused of smearing all Turks. Because of such similarities between the reception of Böhmermann's insulting "poem" against Erdoğan and Charb's indecorous drawings of the Prophet, it is fair to say that both constitute speech that is perceived as blasphemous—one an instance of secular blasphemy, the other an instance of religious blasphemy. In both cases, the blasphemers were silenced—the cartoonists and editors of Charlie Hebdo were gunned down by Islamic terrorists, the German satirist is now legally persecuted by the Muslim president of a foreign state, while his program was censored. Believe it or not, under German law, Böhmermann could face up to five years in prison for his "crime" of insulting a foreign head of state. Welcome to the new dawn of secular crimes of conscience.

One point of controversy is whether Böhmermann's *Schmähgedicht* qualifies as satire or not. On the surface, his *Schmähkritik* is pure insult. On second thought, one never quite knows with Böhmermann. He has so far made a career of being a slippery fish, a meta-satirist so heretical as to subvert satire itself! Böhmermann has a way of pulling the rug of certainty from underneath us and to turn conventional habits of mind into confetti for colorful send-ups. There is absolutely nothing that's sacred for this man, and in the past he has outraged certain constituencies for mocking rap music, parodying soccer stars, or confusing everybody about whether or not Veroufakis had shown Germany the finger. Böhmermann's greatest strength lies in this ability to undercut everything, even his own premises. This slipperiness is both delightful and disorienting. And its heterodox non-conformity is a deeply heretical practice.

With this background in mind, we can argue that Böhmermann's outrageous poem "Schmähkritik" is simply a case of mock character assassination and not an instance of defamation. For one thing, the poem cannot legally count as defamation

because the person making defamatory or libelous statements against another person wants to be believed. There is no way Böhmermann can expect the listeners of his anti-Erdoğan "Schmähgedicht" to believe that Erdoğan shags a hundred sheep every night. The exaggeration of the insults is so plain as to make moot any consideration of their potential truth-claim. What Böhmermann is doing is akin to the American vernacular tradition of ritual invective, i.e. "playing the dozens," or what in a European context is called flyting. According to Terry Lindvall "the art of flyting can best be explained as a sort of medieval jousting with insults; imagine performing the dozens or a rap contest. . . . Flyting can be called, paradoxically, 'the fine art of savage insult'" (*God Mocks*). This art, which originated in Scotland in the 15th century and reached its zenith under Thomas Nashe (1567-c. 1601), consists of "outrageous verbal invention and dexterity, abusive character assassination, and extensive use of scatology" (Lindvall). Voilà a precise summation of Jan Böhmermann's "crime." One cannot sue somebody who is flyting because insult is the sole intention of the whole exercise, with wit being the measuring stick to determine the "winner" of such an exchange. By taking offence, Erdoğan signals that he has lost.

Moreover, if one views Böhmermann's recitation of the controversial poem in context, his talent for making everything slippery and self-referential manifests itself quite clearly. Indeed, it turns out he used the poem to illustrate what one is not allowed to say publicly in Germany. Before proceeding to recite the "poem," Böhmermann went out of his way to explain the distinction between artistic freedom and scurrilous libel, with the latter being illegal in Germany according to article so-and-so. After a few more statements about this distinction, he says we need an example of what such scurrilous libel would look like. That's when the infamous "Schmähgedicht" is being read, i.e. ostensibly as an illustration of what one is not supposed to do. Böhmermann even repeatedly interrupts his reading to emphasize that one must not say what he is saying.

Thus, ostensibly, Böhmermann urged his viewers to censor themselves, using the offensive verses not as assertions but as an exemplum. A similar situation was used to

hilarious effect by Monty Python in *Life of Brian* during the stoning scene. Remember when the prosecutor, who is about to condemn Matthias (son of Deuteronomy of Gath) for uttering Jehovah's name in vain, inadvertently uses Jehovah's name himself? Here's the scene:

Matthias: Look. I don't think it ought to be blasphemy, just saying "Jehovah!"

(Sensation!!!! The women gasp.)

Women: (high voices) He said it again.
(low voices) He said it again.

Official: (to Matthias) You're only making it worse for yourself.

Matthias: Making it worse? How can it be worse? Jehovah, Jehovah, Jehovah.

(Great Sensation!!!!!!)

Official: I'm warning you. If you say "Jehovah" once more ... (He gasps at his error and claps his hand over his mouth. A stone hits him on the side of the head. He reacts.) Right! Who threw that?

And so on... we know the ending of the scene: When the prosecutor inadvertently says "Jehovah" one more time, he is the one being stoned to death rather than Matthias.

I can think of an analogy here. Imagine a German saying "It's illegal in Germany to say 'Sieg Heil'." Well, he just said "Sieg

Heil," while instructing his listeners not to say it. In essence Böhmermann did exactly the same with his poem. This semantic maneuver is so plain as to make one wonder why anybody would be silly enough not to see the self-protective mechanism built into this linguistic trick.

So, both Recep Erdoğan and Angela Merkel are fundamentally mistaken in this case, and the legal proceedings against Böhmermann should be thrown out of court on two points:

1. Böhmermann only engaged in a game of ritual insult à la flyting or "playing the dozens" (emphasis on the word playing!). According to the "rules" of this "game," Erdoğan should have retaliated in kind (which in a manner of speaking he did by having his VP, Numan Kurtulmus, call Böhmermann a "shamelessly insolent man" and characterizing the satirist's transgression as a "grave crime against humanity"). However, the very rules of playing the dozens are based on not believing that the information contained in the insults is factually true; it is simply a kind of sparring of wits, and nobody would dream of indicting for defamation a participant in a game of flyting—well, nobody except Erdoğan.

2. Böhmermann technically framed his insulting poem as a warning, an example of what one must not do. Thus, prosecuting him would be a Monty-Python-esque exercise in absurdity.

Even if Erdoğan's case against Böhmermann had any standing (which it does not), enlightened people need to make a principled stand against Erdoğan's intimidation tactics intended to gag satirists. Satire needs to preserve the freedom to be insulting, heretical, and blasphemous; the same goes for caricature. If we abridge the rights to such freedoms of expression and conscience, we are not only killing satire, we are already handing the victory to the forces of intolerance, fundamentalism, and bigotry.

The Jan Böhmermann affair is a test case to see how much backbone liberal western democracies have to stand up against intimidation from religious fundamentalists and from dictators like Erdoğan. The notorious English pamphleteer and master of flyting, Thomas Nashe (1567-c.1601), ended up going to prison for his sharp insulting tongue. We shall soon find out if Europe has made progress since the 16th century in regard to the freedom of satire and the license of flyting.

Jan
Böhmermann



Remembering Prince

Gregory Erickson, New York University

"For nearly 40 years Prince has served as perhaps our greatest conceptualist of religion, the one most devoted not only to God but to heterodoxy, heresy, blasphemy"

- Peter Coviello, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

The week before he died, I had a long conversation about Prince with some students in my James Joyce class. Searching for an example from real life to demonstrate non-linear and internal narrative, I told the story of a college music school classmate of mine that I had lost touch with who had recently died suddenly and unexpectedly. In reading his obituary, I found out that he had played saxophone in Prince's horn section for a few years in the 1990's. A little further research revealed that he had recorded the bluesy and funky sax solo on Prince's hit song "Sexy M.F." which had been a particular obsession of mine on a road trip I had taken with an ex-girlfriend over twenty years ago. As we had listened to that song over and over again across Connecticut and Vermont, admiring the insanely sexy blend of funk, hip hop, jazz, and blues that sounded completely new to us, I had no idea I was listening to a former friend play. What I explained to my students was that these events—an almost forgotten college friend from the late 80s, a road trip and song in the early 90s, and now an unfortunate death experienced through social media in 2016—resulted in a radical shift in narrative and memory. Like a modernist novel, it became a story told backwards and out of order that changed how I remembered events which shifted my sense of time and reality.

My students seemed to accept this story as a way of thinking about Joyce's experiments in prose and it then led to an interesting conversation that eventually compared both Joyce and his protagonist, Leopold Bloom, to Prince. Like Joyce, my students thought, Prince could only express himself through a multiplicity of styles and genres, both borrowed and invented. And like Bloom, they said, Prince himself was a deeply contradictory figure that could not be described in

traditional narrative or even understood as a single coherent figure. Indeed.

A week later Prince died.

I had been a Prince fan and admirer, seeing him in concert several times, and I had, in fact, as a former Minneapolis trombone player, known a lot of people that played in his various horn sections. In the years following my now more bittersweet road trip with my former girlfriend, I had somewhat lost track of his career and his music. I followed from a distance, maybe once or twice a year sitting down to listen to a CD, usually an old one. What struck me in the hours following his death (the news basically shut down a curriculum committee meeting I was in) was the tone of the dialogue exchanged over social media. We have grown used to these somewhat self-indulgent outpourings of grief—for Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Philip Seymour Hoffman, David Bowie—but this one felt different for me. Of course, we all curate our own social media, and the fact that my Facebook friends are a blend of literature professors, professional musicians, music journalists, and old Minnesota friends certainly contributed to my experience.

The memories, tributes, photos, and essays from fans, scholars, musicians, and writers all seemed to testify to the difference Prince had made on their lives. Many writers phrased their feelings in religious terms. Professor Peter Coviello, in a brilliant piece in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, "Is There God After Prince?" seemed to sum up these sentiments. Coviello labels Prince "the least secular rockstar we have ever known," and writes "Prince is hard to grieve because he is, in an only barely not literal sense, divine."

What most of these religious characterizations do not mention, however, is the well-known fact that Prince was a devoted member of a Jehovah's Witness Church, where he was known as Brother Nelson to church members. First a Seventh Day Adventist and then converting to a Jehovah's

Witness, Prince's identified sects are two of the most indigenous strands of American Christianity and are yet sects that challenge the borders of traditional American Protestantism. As a Seventh Day Adventists, like Little Richard before him, Prince would have been surrounded by a faith that is both an American original and, as Malcolm Bull writes, "a negation of the American Dream" (*Seeking a Sanctuary*, 268). As an American apocalyptic faith, inspired by the Millerite Great Disappointment of 1844, the sect can be considered heretical or heterodox in its acceptance of extra-scriptural authority, its limitations on the power of Christ, its denial of immortal souls, and its centrality of Satan. In converting to a Jehovah's Witness, Prince moved to another apocalyptic cosmic view also heterodox in its denial of the Trinity, its fierce anti-intellectualism, and its celebration of a powerful and angry Gnostic God seeking an ultimate Armageddon victory. What does it do to think of Prince as an apocalyptic Christian that expected Christ's immanent return, and that perhaps distributed tracts, voted Republican, and opposed gay marriage? Is this reconcilable with the idea of Prince as sort of a queer funky divinity? To what extent Prince participated in the theology or politics of his chosen churches and to what extent he was just seeking a familiar community outside of his celebrity may never be known, but what is known is that this side of Prince adds yet another inexpressible contradiction to his person and his music.

But if we learn anything from Prince, it is that one's religion is expressed in multiple ways beyond belief, prayer, or church membership. Religion can also be found in an ecstatic vocal scream or in the yearning or searching wail of a guitar; it can be found in the act of seeming to overpower nature itself during a torrential downpour in front of millions at the Super Bowl, or to appear painfully vulnerable on stage alone with a piano. As I sat in my office that afternoon, I read people's stories of how Prince taught them to make love or to understand a previously unknown part of themselves; I watched YouTube videos of

the 2004 Grammys, the Super Bowl, and old First Avenue shows in Minneapolis (holy shit, could that man play the guitar); but most of all I read the voices of people who he had changed, ask “what now?” A friend of mine wrote, “who will write and sing about desire in a way that respects women’s desire and sexual being and independence? Who will do that?” My friend, like Peter Coviello, echoes Christian theologians in the “radical orthodoxy” tradition for whom the death of their saviour is not necessarily a path to resurrection, but is instead a moment that forces one to imagine an existence alone — a permanent Easter Saturday when the messiah is just dead and buried, and no stones have been rolled aside to reveal an empty tomb.

In many ways, Prince’s “religion” and his “divinity” spring from all of these contradictions. Like Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, he was never any one thing or one person. Early on he sang “Am I black or white?/Am I straight or gay?” and his whole career extended these impossible questions and answers into religion: Was he saint or sinner? Holy or blasphemous? Apocalyptic Christian or sensual shaman? The answer to all of these questions is yes, all of the above. A Prince song, like a Shakespeare sonnet, feels both private and social, both homo- and heterosexual, and both sacred and profane. Coviello points to Prince’s “hotly feminized masculinity,” and his “queer blackness” before finally calling him the “sexiest fucking Emersonian in the history of the world.” It

is in this Emersonian embrace of contradiction and paradox where Prince’s heretical religiosity is most apparent. We should celebrate the fact that it just doesn’t make sense and that this might just be OK. Jon Pareles wrote in the *New York Times* obituary that Prince was a “unifier of dualities,” and maybe he was, but it seems more accurate to say that he exploded them all together. Prince not only sang about and composed contradictions, he embodied the contradictions of popular music, of celebrity, of sexuality, and of American religion and divinity.

*Life is just a party,
and parties weren’t meant to last.*

- Prince 1958-2016

REVIEW

One Sad Devil

Jeremy Carnes, Lindenwood University

The devil hit primetime in 2016. *Lucifer*, a police procedural featuring humanity’s nemesis as its eponymous antihero, wrapped up its premiere season on FOX this April. In addition to starring the devil, the show appears to have the devil’s own luck, for, despite lackluster reviews (a 49% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes, 21% among top critics) and only moderate ratings, FOX recently announced that the show will return for a second season next year.

My feelings about this show are as mixed as those of the critics. On the one hand, I found the show disappointing, for reasons I will discuss shortly. On the other hand, the simple fact that the show makes a protagonist of the most reviled figure in Christian cosmology makes me want to play devil’s advocate. (And no, I’m not going to stop using these idioms; *Lucifer*’s screenwriters, at least, clearly think they constitute the height of wit.) While *Lucifer* has appeared on network television before (he currently has a recurring role on the CW show, *Supernatural*), and has even played the hero occasionally (such as on the satirical cable show, *Southpark*), for a major American television network to make him the main character and hero of a primetime program is, even today, a bold move. And if the show’s creators were too timid to fully embrace their premise’s provocative potential, they still deserve some credit for producing a show that was guaranteed to provoke a backlash from the religious right.

That backlash took the form of petitions circulated by the American Family Association (AFA) and One Million Moms (OMM) to urge FOX not to air the show. Combined, they obtained [over 165,000 signatures](#) by the time of *Lucifer*’s premiere. Having failed to keep the show off the air, they shifted their efforts toward turning it into a commercial failure by going after the show’s advertisers (including Olive Garden, Energizer, and Academy Sports + Outdoors). They [urged their members](#) to contact these

businesses and inform them that their “advertising dollars are supporting sympathy towards the devil and glorifying Satan and that financial support should be pulled immediately.”

What precisely do the AFA and OMM object to? According to their calls to action, *Lucifer* is “spiritually dangerous”:

[It] glorifies Satan as a caring, likable person in human flesh. The character Lucifer Morningstar makes being the devil look cool, drives a fancy car, gets out of a speeding ticket, owns a nightclub in LA, and is irresistible to women. ...

At the same time, God’s emissary, the angel Amenadiel, has been sent to Los Angeles to convince Lucifer to return to the underworld. Lucifer questions Amenadiel, ‘Do you think I’m the devil because I’m inherently evil or just because dear old Dad decided I was?’ The question is meant to make people rethink assumptions about good and evil, including about God and Satan.

The premiere included graphic acts of violence, a nightclub featuring scantily-clad women, and a demon. The message of the show is clear. *Lucifer* is just misunderstood. He doesn’t want to be a bad guy, it’s God who is forcing him to play that role.

An attractive devil, sex and violence, and the audacity to confront its audience with ideas that might make them question their religious assumptions — that’s more than reason enough for the AFA and OMM to attack the show. Of course, for the literary-minded, there’s nothing new about this characterization of *Lucifer*. It’s a conception at least as old as the Romantic Period, when William Blake, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron borrowed (or rather, intentionally misunderstood and repurposed) John Milton’s take on the rebel angel whose protests against absolute power spoke to their own disenchantment with Britain’s oppressive political and

religious institutions. But then, I imagine that few members of the AFA and OMM would be counted among the admirers of these poets.

However, while I obviously disagree with these organizations' protests, I acknowledge that it would be unfair to be overly dismissive of them. Even for more mainstream Christians (or for believers of other persuasions and non-believers, for that matter), this portrayal of Lucifer could be disconcerting. In fact, the aspect of the show that I find most disappointing as a defender of heterodoxy is precisely what the AFA and OMM find most objectionable as defenders of orthodoxy: aside from his incorrigible narcissism, Lucifer (played by Tom Ellis) is likeable and extremely human. Indeed, when he is in the presence of the show's female lead, Chloe Decker (Lauren German), he actually becomes mortal – one of the show's cleverer conceits, as it prevents the show's moments of violence from seeming pointless (why should an immortal angel care when you point a gun at him?) and also adds an interesting twist to the normal buddy-cop dynamic (Chloe is safer when her partner is there to back her up, but Lucifer is actually *only* in danger when his partner is around).

Lucifer spends a portion of almost every episode talking over his problems with his therapist (Rachel Harris), and those problems are decidedly human: frustration over his unrequited desire for Chloe, confusion over his identity, and, above all, his daddy issues. Lucifer always refers to God as "Dad," and it would seem that all of the angels in the show's universe consider God to be their father in a very literal sense. This is the show's most provocative idea: on *Lucifer*, the only Son of God who matters is the devil. I don't recall the show ever mentioning God's more popular son, although an image of him does appear in several episodes. Lucifer possesses a "pentecostal coin," a magical artifact that operates as a get-out-of-Hell-free pass. One side has an image of Baphomet (not a representation of himself that Lucifer cares for) inscribed inside a pentagram; the other side has an image of the crucifixion inscribed inside a triangle. While you could take this symbolism to mean that Jesus and Lucifer are polar opposites, the portrayal of Lucifer on the show would seem to suggest a rather more literal interpretation: Lucifer and Jesus, both Sons of God, are two sides of the same coin.

Effectively, the show presents a kind of Arian heresy, only it's not Jesus but Lucifer who has been demoted from his traditional position at the zenith (or rather, nadir) of a cosmological hierarchy. Lucifer is just like us, a sentient being confused about his place in the cosmos and upset that he neither fully understands nor has a say in the rules governing that cosmos. And while the show stops short of suggesting that God is in the wrong for his treatment of Lucifer, it does validate Lucifer's feelings of abandonment and betrayal, and it treats his desire for autonomy and self-determination with sympathy. Meanwhile, the angel God has tasked with getting Lucifer back to Hell, Amenadiel (D. B. Woodside), is the closest thing the show has to a central villain. By the end of the season, he and Lucifer have achieved a tense but respectful sibling relationship, with Amenadiel making more concessions than Lucifer does.

This portrayal of Lucifer as the black sheep in a cosmically (and often comically) dysfunctional family is driven home by the season finale's cliffhanger revelation. A dazed Lucifer informs Amenadiel that "Dad" has agreed to let him remain on Earth if he assists in recapturing a fugitive from Hell. Who is this fugitive? Lucifer responds ominously: "Mom." In [an interview](#), the show's executive producer, Joe Henderson, confessed that he had expected FOX to reject this plot twist, but apparently the network's powers-that-be found it exciting. And it is. A popular television show that introduces a Goddess into the Christian cosmology – and suggests that she has been imprisoned in Hell at God's command – might do a lot to "make people rethink assumptions."

Henderson also looks at the introduction of "Mom" as a chance for the show to blaze a new trail for its protagonist. The series is technically based on a version of Lucifer created by Neil Gaiman (one clearly grounded in the Miltonic-Romantic tradition of the character) for his graphic novel masterpiece, *The Sandman*, and whose story was subsequently expanded upon in a spin-off series, *Lucifer*, by Mike Carey. Gaiman was not involved in the production of the television series, but [he did comment upon the petitions against it](#):

Ah. It seems like only yesterday (but it was 1991) that the "Concerned Mothers of America" announced that they were boycotting SANDMAN because it contained Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans characters. It was Wanda that upset them most: the idea of a Trans Woman in a comic book... They told us they were organising a boycott of SANDMAN, which they would only stop if we wrote to the American Family Association and promised to reform.

I wonder if they noticed it didn't work last time, either...

It's not surprising that Gaiman would come to the series's defense in the face of a campaign to limit artistic expression. But I am a little surprised that Gaiman hasn't launched his own petition to have his name removed from the show's credits. The show borrows nothing from the stories he created, save for a few character names and the central conceit: Lucifer quits his position as Lord of Hell and opens a piano bar in Los Angeles. Frankly, I don't understand Henderson's claim that introducing God's mate will allow the series to finally step out of the shadow of its famous source material. The show has made almost no use of its source material.

This, for me, is the show's greatest heresy, and the primary reason I am disappointed in it. Gaiman's *The Sandman* is one of the great classics of twentieth-century literature, and Lucifer's appearance in issue #4 of the graphic novel provided the first hints of the metaphysical and philosophical scope that the graphic novel would eventually attain. While I have not read all of the run of Carey's *Lucifer*, that comic also takes seriously Lucifer's existential angst without reducing it to childish protest, and follows Lucifer's quest to free himself (really, to free the entire universe) from the tyranny of predestination. Gaiman and Carey's Lucifer is fundamentally inhuman, and his concerns have cosmic scope.

"Freedom is his obsession," one character observes in *Lucifer* #1. This is the Lucifer who lit the stars at the dawn of the universe. The only thing Lucifer is obsessed with on the television show is himself, and the only thing he gets lit is himself.

We have seen this character before. The narcissistic genius, the jerk whom everyone adores. He is House, he is Sherlock, he is Castle. *Lucifer* follows the same formula as the hit shows bearing these characters' names. FOX took Lucifer – the figure who plays the role of primeval rebel in Christian cosmology, and who plays that role with a postmodern twist in Gaiman's graphic novel, rebelling even against his role *as* the primeval rebel – and it placed him in the safest of all possible television genres: the police procedural. Meanwhile, his rebellion against God primarily takes the form of having a lot of sex. (This is perhaps the greatest irony of the AMA and OMM complaints about the show's sexiness: repeatedly associating casual sex with demonic characters, *Lucifer* is actually a rather sex-negative show.) While it's common for adaptations of comics to squander the potential of their sources, the loss of breadth and depth here is on an unusually grand scale.

In the penultimate episode of the season, a Satanist going by the name of Corazón (Spanish for *heart*) comes under suspicion for murder. When Decker discovers that Corazón's real name is Mike

Carey, I realized the show was finally paying a small tribute to the author of some of its superior source materials. However, shortly after this revelation, Lucifer and Decker find Carey's mutilated corpse. Carey – the heart of this story, the true believer in Lucifer – is carved up by the real killer, a man who is only parodying devil-worship. I'd like to think that the show's writers are poking fun at their travestying of their source material, but nothing about this show convinces me that they have that level of self-awareness.

Still, I must give the devil his due: the show works. Judging it purely on the standards of its genre, it performs strongly in what is probably the single most important element of such a show: the charm and chemistry of its leads. Throw in the novelty of its conceit (which hasn't yet worn off during its short premiere season's thirteen episode run) and its otherwise unremarkable-but-competent production, and you have enough for a successful network program. If the show can just adopt a bit of its protagonist's devil-may-care attitude next season – and the introduction of "Mom" suggests it might finally have the courage to do so – there's still a chance it could transcend its formulaic structure and start exploring ideas that will make it a worthy heir to its literary lineage.

Lucifer's pentacostal coin
(Source: celebrityjewelry.net)



The Theologian as Heretic in a Secular Age

John Daniel Holloway, III, Union Theological Seminary

There is nothing heretical about critiquing theism in the name of rationalism. Not today. While “Dare to know” was once a bold assertion encouraging relentless commitment to the truth over and against authoritarian tutelage, today, under the modern secular state, this position says nothing subversive. It is now *easy* to see problems with theism and to reject it outright. It is now easy to call faith wish-fulfillment and theism regressive. As Charles Taylor observed, we live in a secular age. A half a millennium ago, he says, in Western society it was “virtually impossible not to believe in God,” but now, “many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable” (2007, 25). The question becomes, Is this development due to progress? Was theism pushed out because reason and our better judgment took over? Taylor demonstrates that, on the contrary, post-Enlightenment secularism was an ideology that had to be learned. He further demonstrates that developments which led to this secularism were originally theological developments. I do not have the space to get into his argument, but the contention I want to draw from Taylor (one John Milbank [2006] makes as well) is that secularism is just another theology. My own contention is that it isn’t a very good theology because it depends too heavily on the human.

Fundamental to theology is a basic distrust of human construals of reality on the basis of our frailty. The human is ultimately self-centered and self-serving. Out of this ultimate self-interest spring idolatrous interpretations of life and oppressive constructions of power. In short, the human is sinful. True theology, the theology which knows its subject is *God*, offers relentless contestation to the idolatry of the sinful human. God is the question mark over against all human construals of reality and structures of power. God is relentlessly subversive to any and all domestication, and so endlessly resistant to the legitimization of human authority. God, as Karl Barth says, presents us with

“the final protest against every high place that men can occupy” (1933, 467).

The modern “high place” is a secular one. The secular state depicts its construction of society as not only bereft of religious corruption, but necessitated by reason. The supposed motivation of the secular state is the shared pursuit of a just society through reason. In this way, it is paraded as good and democratic. Under more critical analysis, however, the secular state is revealed not to be a reason-centered structure immune to the frailty of religious tendencies and the violent consequences of a religiously-motivated state; rather, the secular state is enmeshed in the same tendencies as its so-called “religious” counterparts, and, furthermore, is built upon a system of violence fueled by those tendencies.

The violence of the secular state is concealed behind the veil of ‘reason’, interpreted for us as untainted by religious biases and so lacking the risk of arbitrary power. The flaws of this interpretation, however, have been exposed in recent years by those like Talal Asad (2003), William Cavanaugh (2009), and William Connolly (2000). The secular state as the omnipotent lawgiver determines what is lawful, and so yields the power to make weal and create woe. What the secular state does must by definition be necessitated by reason. Thus, when someone tells a story of an Islamic terrorist killing Christians or Jews in the name of God, it is wholly believable. When such things happen, we refer to “the wrath of faith” (see Gopnick 2015) and write books about the violent nature of religion (see Juergensmeyer 2003). However, when one says thousands of innocent civilians were killed by the U.S., the response is one of justification, or rationalization, as if these sorts of events are simply inescapable. In the latter, it’s easier to say, “There has to be more to the story.”

Buried beneath the “democratic” and “just” trappings is a secret (and idolatrous) theology, a secret belief in the sovereignty of the secular state. Much like Richard Nixon’s claim, “If the president does it, it’s not illegal,” this theology says, “If the secular state does it, it must be reasonable.” The task of the theologian today is to contest this modern self-confidence, to dispute the reliability of human reason, and to protest against human constructions of power by pointing to God, who calls humans and their power-structures into question, who keeps humanity in check. This is the more heretical enterprise. Theologians dare to have faith.

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Sartor Resartus: Response to John Daniel Holloway, III

James Morrow, novelist

The late physicist Murray Gell-Mann famously decorated his office with a doctor's prescription ordering him not to argue with philosophers. I'm tempted to ask my own physician for one forbidding me to argue with theologians. But I'm prepared to make an exception in the present case. Just as John Daniel Holloway III was invited to deconstruct "*Charlie Hebdo* and the Wrath of Faith," my *excommunicated* piece about the Paris massacre (in which I chided public intellectuals who invested more energy in excoriating the cartoonists than in lamenting the medieval reasoning of their murderers), so was I asked to reply to Holloway's essay, "The Theologian as Heretic in a Secular Age."

I'll begin by saying Mr. Holloway is clearly on to something. We indeed inhabit a culture in which the priorities of academics, scientists, and analytic philosophers bespeak the loss of the Christian consensus. In many epistemocentric circles, people of faith are made to feel like outsiders, constrained to disclose their worldviews piecemeal, lest they be taken for purveyors of unconsidered piety. Intellectual churchgoers are within their rights to cast Kant's "Dare to know" as an ideal that has run its course, at least insofar as "Dare to have faith" is now where the bracingly heretical action is.

Holloway spins much of his essay from the work of Charles Taylor, a Canadian Roman Catholic philosopher venerated by multitudes. I myself am not a Taylor aficionado. Several years ago my philosophy book-discussion group slogged through the inert prose and turgid polemics of *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, all 624 pages of it. Reading Taylor, I kept thinking of Yurii Andreievich Zhivago's rant against the "political mysticism" of his Red Army captors, and while I'm certain there's far more to *Sources of the Self* than Christian apologetics masquerading as panoramic history, I could not find it.

And then came *A Secular Age*. By Holloway's account, Taylor would have us understand that, just as our forebears inhabited a deterministic age of faith in which a pervasive Christendom precluded non-supernaturalist perspectives and made atheism a borderline unthinkable thought, so do we occupy an equally deterministic secular age in which disbelief is "not only easy, but even inescapable." Determinism, I feel, should be made of sterner stuff. Allow me to report that, atheist though I am, I have no trouble thinking with, and being moved by, theological constructs (heretical and otherwise), from Presbyter Arius's subordinate Christ (the Council of Nicaea being the subject of my novel-in-progress) to Martin Luther's divine heart-rack to Baruch Spinoza's sublime pantheism to Teilhard de Chardin's exhilarating Omega Point to Paul Tillich's congenial Ground of All Being. For me these ideas are neither incoherent nor preposterous. I merely decline to accord them the status of reality or regard them as relevant to the question of state-sponsored violence that so understandably concerns the author of "The Theologian as Heretic in a Secular Age."

As I interpret Holloway's assessment of the modern hegemonic nation state, we are obliged to correlate its atrocities with the ascent of secularism, subsequently seeking a remedy in a quest for the divine. It's a cogent and appealing idea. Indeed, if we grant to the argument its assumption of an elusive but emphatically benevolent God, we find ourselves in a zone of such impeccable rectitude that only a sociopath would hesitate to follow us there.

The formula evidently goes something like this: theism = provisional escape from mortal limitations = transcendent ethics = resistance to state-sponsored violence. By contrast, atheism = humanocentrism = seduction by specious reason = acquiescence to state-sponsored violence. But two can play in that ballpark. A sober thinker might argue, just as soundly, for an amalgam whereby atheism = loyalty to the given world = mistrust of human institutions = disgust with consecrated cruelty = resistance to state-sponsored violence. (Would anyone dispute that eloquent denunciations of ideologically sanctioned brutality are no more likely to originate with believers than with rationalists like Noam Chomsky and Peter Singer?) The concomitant declension therefore becomes theism = divided loyalties = preference for the divine = commitment to enacting God's will = support for state-sponsored violence. All of this is clearly nonsense; there are too many terms in the equations, too much rolling stock between locomotive and caboose. Permit me to suggest that we forego such moralizing—moral arguments, after all, though normally boring, always win, terminating in the *reductio ad hitlerum*—and attempt to wrestle the problem of historical determinism to the ground.

In my view, Charles Taylor's understanding of ages gone by is not merely problematic. It is false. One need look no further than Jonathan Miller's *Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief* (BBC, 2004) or Tim Whitmarsh's *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (Knopf, 2015) to realize that, *mutatis mutandis*, atheistic, secular, and anti-religious thought has always been with us. (I should hasten to add that Miller is happy to acknowledge the ways religion often seems to underwrite the generosity of human beings, and I must also note that Whitmarsh is no hot-eyed misotheist of the sort celebrated in Bernard Schweizer's *Hating God* but a scholar seeking to redress an imbalance.) To assent to Taylor's notion that, prior to the advent of early modern Europe, it was "virtually impossible not to believe in God" is to risk running afoul of Diagoras of Melos, Lucian of Samosata, Democritus, Epicurus, arguably Socrates, and countless other such skeptics on Judgment Day.

But do we really live in a secular age, an epoch that systematically denies alleged transcendent realities? This diagnosis would certainly be news to the vast female population of the Muslim world, to anyone living in Israel, to the victims of Church-nurtured anti-LGBT bigotry in Vladimir Putin's Russia, and to the citizens of the remaining Marxist states (regimes that, as Holloway himself acknowledges, are religiously inflected). Meanwhile, can

Taylor be unaware that, here in the United States, we are plagued with politicians who would cheerfully and instantly transform this republic into a Christian theocracy if they could only figure out how to bring it off?

I applaud John Daniel Holloway's insistence that we attempt to separate good theology from bad (a project perhaps analogous to sorting falsifiable theories from junk science). But there's a problem. If we cannot employ the protocols of the dreaded Enlightenment, if secular reason is *ipso facto* spurious, how are we to recognize good theology when we find it? By consulting the Bible, with its relentless endorsements of slavery, misogyny, homophobia, and ethnic cleansing (to say nothing of Jesus's grotesquely anti-Semitic speeches in chapter eight of John's

Gospel)? By invoking private numinous experiences? That certainly works within circumscribed communities of like-minded theists, but in most contexts we never seem to get beyond the spectacle of a believer (that is, a person) trying to talk sense into a nonbeliever (that is, another person) while the revelation itself remains stubbornly offstage.

It would appear that in theological matters we are never really outside the human. And that, I would argue, is a good thing. Before deciding that reason has been tried and found wanting, maybe we should actually give reason a try. But that would require a secular age of a sort that has not yet dawned, and perhaps never will.

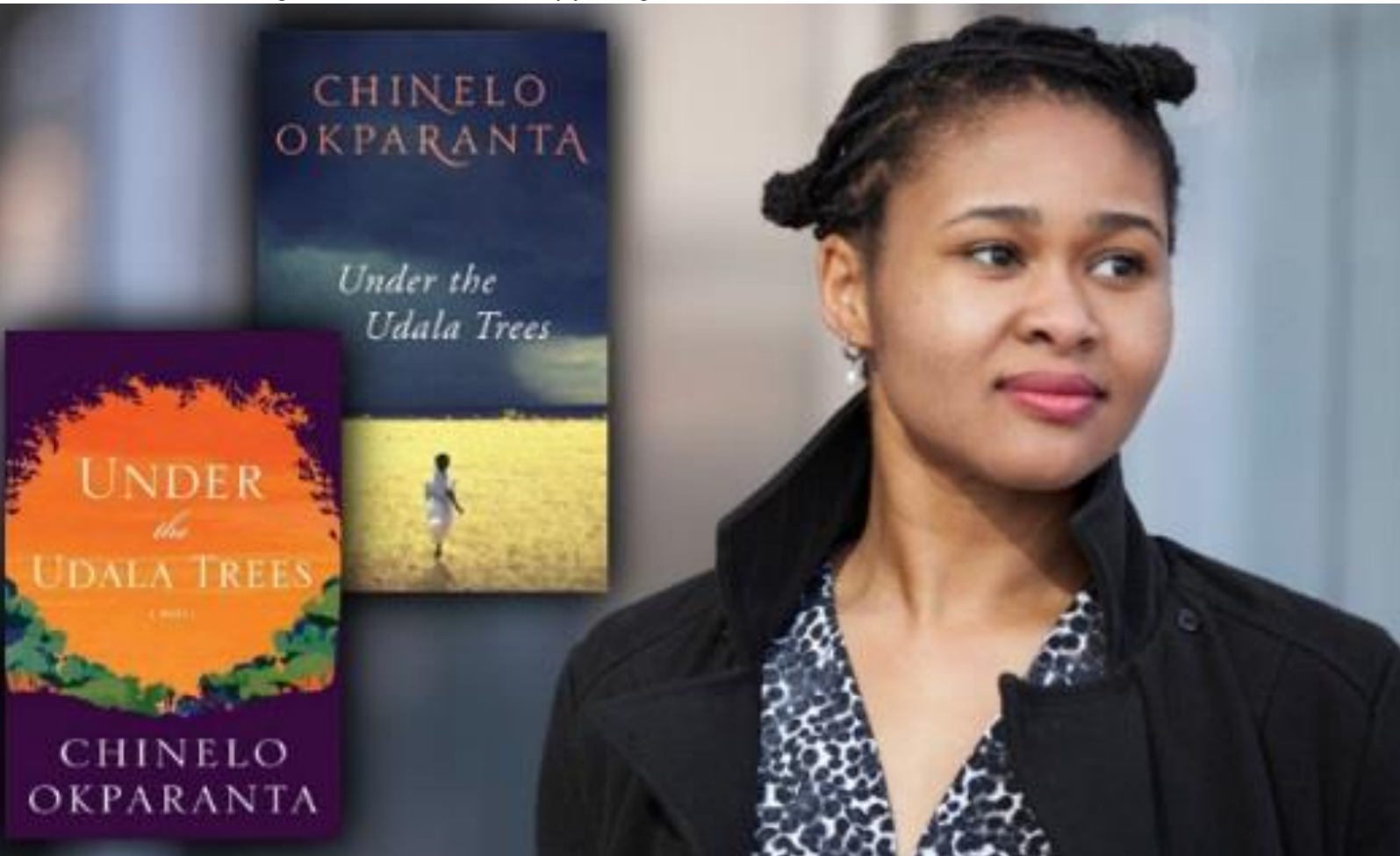
R E V I E W

Under the Udala Trees, by Chinelo Okparanta (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015)

Rev. David Dickinson, Trinity Church, Sutton, UK

As I lift my head from months of concentrated work writing a book on the depiction of Methodists in British fiction since 1890 (*Yet Alive?* forthcoming from Cambridge Scholars Press), I think to myself that I have read novels with theological, spiritual or religious themes since I first began seriously to study and research the interface between religion and literature over twenty years ago.

No! I correct myself. I have read novels with theological, spiritual or religious themes ever since I first read novels in primary school. Because novels have the power to probe deeply into the lives of humans (and animals), they have an affinity with theological, spiritual, and broadly religious themes.



At the same time, our definitions of theology, spirituality, and religion have recently become broader and more flexible. Theology includes atheology as much as it includes both orthodoxy and heresy, belief and disbelief. Spirituality roams free of formal belief systems and can be thought of as anything that brings us close to that which is beyond, beneath or within whatever meets the eye. Our definition of religion remains narrower, yet novelists nevertheless find it difficult to avoid reference to religious practices in their novels, for humankind seems to be naturally ritualistic. So, when I read fiction, I read of faith (sometimes in its absence).

The epigraph chosen for *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta reminds me that to read novels is an exercise in faith, by which I suspend disbelief to enter the world the novelist has created for me. The epigraph is a well-known quotation from the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews (though in an unfamiliar translation) which describes faith as “the evident demonstration of not beheld realities.” Okparanta’s novel, her first, is set against the backdrop of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970, often known as the Biafran War, which caused untold suffering (coincidentally, I was hearing news of this war on TV around the time I first began reading novels), and it tells of a young woman’s struggle against oppressive tradition to find her true identity. Her name is Ijeoma, and her father was killed in the war when she was eleven.

Hypocritical religion has always been an easy target for satire and novelists. In recent decades, oppressive, ignorant and fundamentalist expressions of religion have frequently come in for justified criticism, as the ruinous effect these have on people’s lives and the threat they pose to society’s wellbeing have become more apparent. Worryingly though, the rebuttal of such religion sometimes takes the form of equally oppressive and fundamentalist atheism. Our society for the study of heresy builds on the realisation that intolerance cannot be countered by intolerance. Okparanta’s novel sees this, too.

Living in one of the most religious countries in the world, Ijeoma struggles with her blossoming sexuality, her marriage and her motherhood, and her story is complicated by her mother’s fierce religiosity, which is prepared to use prayer and the Bible, variously, for succour, for self-defence, for attack and for control. Ijeoma’s mother picks out texts—Sodom and Gomorrah, parts of Leviticus and the book of Judges—which hold people in thrall, including one in which virgin daughters are offered to rampaging enemies in order to protect male guests. Ijeoma, reading “hospitality” of this order as cowardice, asks, “What kind of men offer up their daughters and wives to be raped in place of themselves?” Ijeoma’s mother, believing that her daughter misses the point of the biblical narrative, would use such texts to manoeuvre her daughter into a marriage she would not choose. Although readers initially think the man Ijeoma marries is good, he puts her through appalling emotional and physical abuse. Any form of religion or spirituality that imposes this on a person is ripe for novelistic and actual condemnation.

Ijeoma’s problem—or, more correctly, her traditionalist family’s and society’s problem with her—is that she is lesbian. At the end of Part II, Ijeoma’s mother reads to her daughter several biblical texts from which she concludes that the “kind of behaviour between you and that girl is the influence of demonic spirits.” She asks whether Ijeoma still thinks of her lover in “that way.” Exhausted by the onslaught, Ijeoma, in shaking her head, lies to her mother for the first time. This clash between conservative religion and the more liberal expectations of modern life, a clash between an intolerant faith and a young woman whom it excludes, is visualised in an episode when Ijeoma attends a speakeasy with her lover, Amina. Significantly, the speakeasy for gay women is located in a building that is, by day, a church. Many of us readers are unable to think of a more appropriate place for such a meeting. But they and other lesbian women are forced to run for their lives when the building is torched and, when they come out of hiding, they discover that one who failed to escape was burned to

death. The violent destruction evident in this scene is breath-taking in its brutality, yet the perpetrators of this crime think they are doing God’s work. The novelist’s condemnation of this form of religion, which I see as dangerously heretical, is unequivocal.

What sets this novel apart, however, is that Okparanta depicts a fruitful alternative to the oppressive religion she condemns. For her, Christianity is meant to be liberating and the Bible’s theme is revision. She reads Hebrews 8: 6 as the Bible’s key interpretative passage: “Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant.” In short, this suggests that the Bible is revisionist. Okparanta’s theme is that reflection and revision in life are important because, through them, (to use the theist language of her characters) God moves us on from old and tired laws that are incapable of being applied to new circumstances. Okparanta suggests that God is still speaking, drawing us on from being fettered to arid orthodoxy, only we are too deaf and too set in our ways to hear. Ijeoma, thankfully, finds in the Bible a book that gives her succour; it is not only the abusive tool of oppressive religion; it can also free us and help us find our place—as nonconformists, dissenters or true-to-ourselves individuals, even as heretics—in the story of God.

I encouraged our church book club to read this novel. Nothing brave about that. It’s an open-minded, free-thinking and liberal church. What I wait to hear are stories of traditionalist, conservative, even fundamentalist theists reading *Under the Udala Trees* and being so moved by it that they see and feel its truth. I hope the wait is not long. I feel that Okparanta, whose novel is unlikely to tax readers of *eXcommunicated*, makes a significant populist literary contribution to the interests of our Society, which include an honest appraisal of the dialogue between believers and unbelievers and a careful listening to people who think and believe differently.

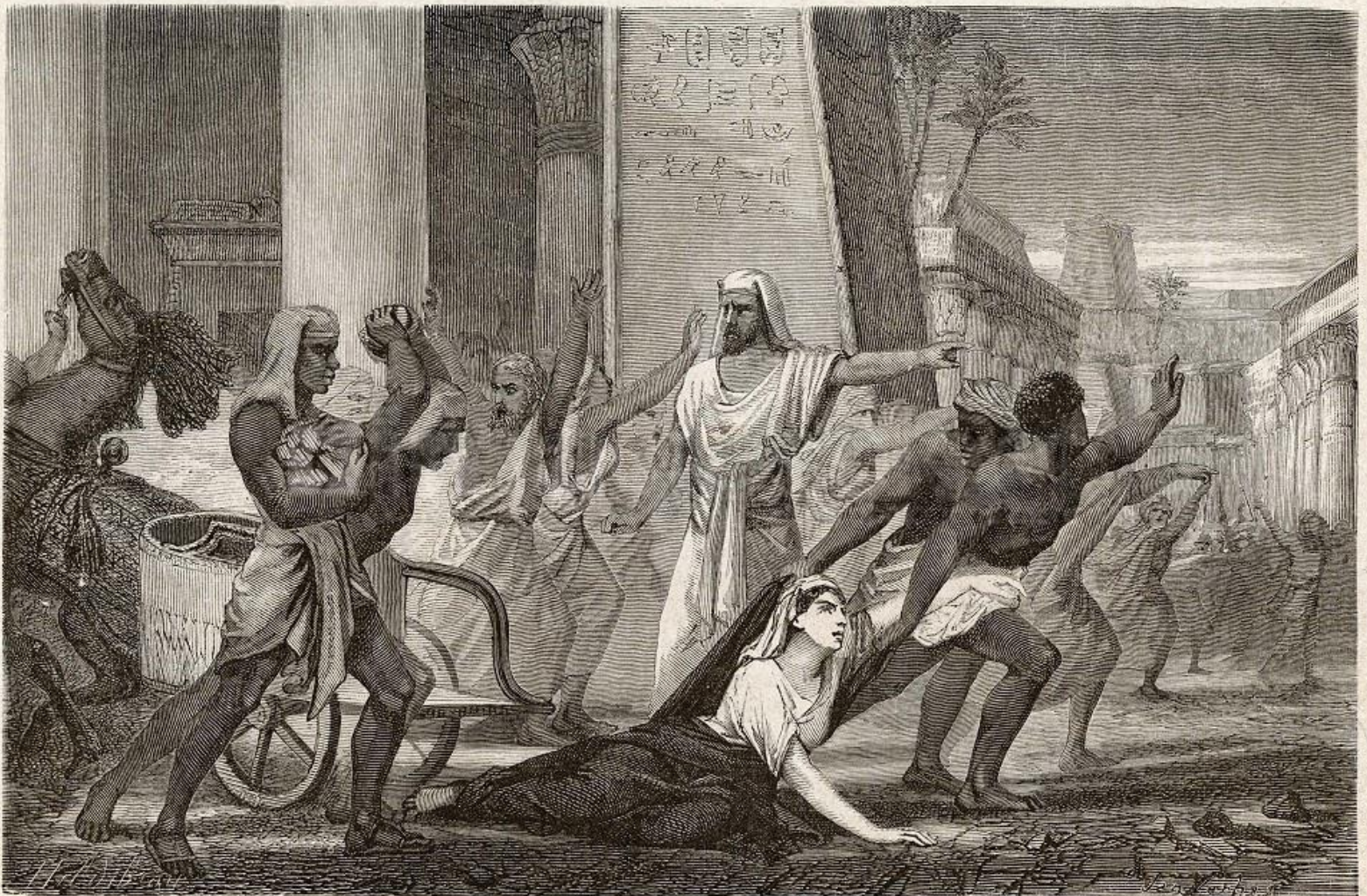
Hypatia

Ed Simon, Lehigh University

In the sixteen centuries since her death in 415 C.E., the word “Hypatia,” whether shouted or whispered, has often sounded like an incantation. Whether through providence or metempsychosis we find the names that we’re meant to have. The name “Hypatia” sounds simultaneously understated, like a faint sound only dimly heard, while still being grounded enough and physical enough to occupy a weighted space in the mouth. It is a name that is incantatory, hallucinatory, astrological. An uttered secret name that has paradoxically been remembered for more than a millennium and a half after her martyrdom.

Hypatia was at home in that fertile Mediterranean world of occultism and magic, where the rational geometry of Euclid was not so different from the numerological mysticism of Pythagoras. The story goes that inscribed above Aristotle’s Academy was something to the effect of “Let no man ignorant of geometry enter here,” and though she was not a man, her father the mathematician Theon made sure that his daughter would be as worthy of admittance to that institution as any

other human who worked in the abstract realm of numbers and shapes. Hypatia’s thinking has affinities with Plato and his later student Plotinus, but it is also grounded in the complex religious and cultural world of her native Alexandria, that city of wide marble streets and alabaster columns. Here, in that polyglot Greek city on the African coast, a new Hellenized culture was born from the fusion of those ancient Egyptian hermetic mysticisms and Greek rationalism (or perhaps more fairly “rationalism”). If, true to Alexandria’s famed lighthouse and her massive library, the city was truly a wonder of the world, then Hypatia was one of that city’s most illustrious children. Hypatia is often depicted as not just the last of a certain type of classical philosopher, but in some ways as the very embodiment of the late classical world. But even if it is fair to see her generally as the last of the ancients before the light of classical learning is extinguished as surely as those soon-to-be-untended fires in that lighthouse, she was also most definitely a child of a particular place, and that is her native Alexandria.



MORT DE LA PHILOSOPHE HYPATIE. A ALEXANDRIE
Death of the Philosopher Hypatia, in Alexandria (1866) by Louis Figuier

As a daughter of Alexandria, she was privy to the mélange of cultures and religions that distinguished that city, named for one conqueror who fancied himself a messiah (and was a false one, just like all the rest) as well as a place which another conqueror, Marc Antony, wished to make his capital (as opposed to bureaucratic, overly-masculine Rome). In the Alexandria of the early fifth century we have a city that does not yet quite know that it is on the cusp, that it turns on an invisible axis of history. Here there are of course pagans like Hypatia, educated in the most intellectually rigorous contours of that multifaceted tradition. We have Hellenized Jews like the great historian and philosopher Philo; who are descendants of the men who translated the Hebrew Bible at the behest of a Greek pharaoh. And we have Christians, diverse in their own sectarian concerns and forging a new allegorical hermeneutic in opposition to the literalist interpretative school of Antioch, all while being the first worshipers to replace Isis with Mary and Horus with Christ in their icons of the young faith. It was in this mixture of humanity, one that was often far from peaceful, that Hypatia was nurtured. From the bosom of this capital of the classical world she would draw succor and experience. What city could have raised such a willful child but Alexandria?

And what parent but Alexandria could have willed such a cruel infanticide? The supreme injustice of Hypatia's life is that though we use her name as a kind of incantation, it is normally only whispered by her admirers, while her enemies scream it like the Copt John of Niku who asserted that she "beguiled many people through her Satanic wiles." These wiles it would seem are grossly over-stated, for as a good Platonist she disdained the coarse, corpuscular, gritty messiness of the physical body was but a pale imitation of the perfect world of ideal forms. Sometimes, this manifested itself in a prudery (if indeed that's what it was) that would be shocking to our modern liberal sensibilities; when propositioned by a student (for Hypatia is remembered as an incredible beauty) she reportedly rubbed his nose in her spent menstrual pad, asking if this was the filth which he loved.

There are many Hypatias. She served equally as a symbol of classical vanity and an emblem of rational Athens that has nothing to do with sacred Jerusalem; or as a cipher on which we may project our own elegies of a sophisticated culture snuffed out by the coming chill of the Dark Ages. She rarely gets to either whisper or shout her own name. None of her writings survive. Whether victim of increasing Christian intolerance, or martyr for a cultured, cosmopolitan paganism, the woman herself is no longer able to speak; her writings have long since been consigned to the flames or were conquered by entropy just like her own stripped and flayed body was burnt when dragged away from the crowded streets. Sadly, this is finally what she was most famous for: her death. Like those Christian martyrs whose contemporary she was, she would die for her visibility,

her stiff-necked obstinacy, and for her beliefs. What is tragic about this is that those beliefs would largely perish after her as well, even if centuries later she would be transformed into a symbol of science, democracy, or simply a convenient symbol for tolerance.

Hypatia (1867) by Julia Margaret Cameron

As is true with all of our featured heretics, they are citizens of an alien land called the past, and it does Hypatia no good to enlist her in causes like modern science that would have been foreign to her. That she lived and died while peacefully promulgating her own teachings is cause enough to mourn her; that her words must forever remain silent, whatever they may have been, compounds our grief. It was no foregone conclusion that Hypatia would have to die that way; she was a casualty in a strategic war between Cyril (we shall not give him the designation of "Saint" here) and Orestes, her secular ally and the prefect of the city. Alexandria was not yet a Christian theocracy, and although Cyril was many things – an inciter to violence, a demagogue, a thug – he was not a dictator. In the political tussling between these two men in Alexandria, Hypatia

was to be a victim of Cyril's ambition, and a warning to others who would side with the pluralistic civil government of Orestes. And so we have what is sadly perhaps the most enduring image of the philosopher, that is of Hypatia stripped and flayed alive by an enraged mob skinning her with sharpened oyster shells, scrapping her flesh off with shards of roofing tile before burning her alive within the Church of Caesarum. An obviously singularly dramatic event in its horror, the fact that so many date this as the end of classical antiquity is not surprising.

Of course it's too simple to say that with the sacrifice of Hypatia the classical world died in that Egyptian church, called

Caesarum. Too much of history still waited, Julian the Apostate's Roman rule was yet to come, heights of classical learning like Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* had yet to be written. Ages seldom begin and end so seamlessly with the death or the birth of a single person. Events do not constitute eras, only arbitrary human definitions do. That Cyril was a type of absolutist monster and that Hypatia represented the best intellectual virtues of paganism is not to be doubted, and yet there is no reason to assume that had history hinged in different ways a pagan posterity would necessarily have been more tolerant. Remember that her defender, Orestes, was a Christian. What we finally see in her murder is not just a pagan martyrdom, but more importantly a human martyrdom, for the beliefs that she died for are not as important as the simple truth that she died for them. Hypatia believed in the One, that which sustains all other things as ultimate ground of all being. Let us hope that upon her immolation, particles of her reunited with that transcendent source which she spent her life contemplating.



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