



XIV: ON RELIGION

*“A little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to
atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men’s
minds about to religion.”*

— Francis Bacon

The topic?

God.

Not just the topic of this essay, but increasingly, the topic of my phone conversations with friends as well.

It may be an age thing, it may not be. Only God knows.

The Intellectual & Philosophical Paths to God

There are two ways you can arrive at this destination.

One is through life experience, and one is through intellectual slash philosophical reflection — exactly what Bacon was talking about in his quote above.

There are probably more than two ways, but I’m not that bright.

I tend to think the first way is a prerequisite for the second — that lived experience precedes intellectual rumination —

though plenty of people arrive at the first without proceeding on to the second.

I happened to come to both at approximately the same time. We'll focus more here on the second part, starting with why one is best off accepting Pascal's Wager.

Pascal's Wager: Skewed Risk/Reward

The TL;DR of the Wager is that you lose nothing from choosing to believe in God, whether he exists or not.

If you believe, and he exists, wonderful.

If you choose *not* to believe, and it turns out he *does* exist, you're in trouble.

Thus, the logical path is to believe.

Here is what Pascal believes you gain even if he doesn't exist: "Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly, you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing."

No lies detected. Belief in God and perfection of character go hand-in-hand.

A Fatal and Seductive Lie

My thinking also changed as I came to a deeper understanding of science.

Nietzsche wrote that Christianity is “the most fatal and seductive lie that ever existed,” and while I have zero opinion on that ridiculously provocative statement, the choice of words is powerful and they increasingly describe how I feel about most of modern science: *a fatal and seductive lie*.

Not that science in itself is a lie, but the way that science is used to state opinions or unfounded speculations as fact, along with how new scientific *truths* always seem to expose the old *truths* as fiction. I think 2020 woke a lot of people up to the fact that when experts tell you that something is proven by science, there is a high probability that you are being fed complete nonsense. And once you look deeper into the scientific method, how research is performed and the margin for error in how conclusions are drawn, and the fact that behind all of it lurks the same corruption inherent in man (money, power, politics, etc.), you start to question everything you were once told as “*well, it’s just science.*”

And then, once you start questioning, once you slow down, once you take a look around at nature and at this world with a beginner’s mind and look at the vast interplay of all living things and the beauty of existence, you have to just shake your head and say “*there ain’t no damn way, bruh. There ain’t NO way that all of this shit wasn’t created under the command of a Divine marshal.*”

Only humans, as vain and presumptuous as we are, could truly believe that we’ve come up with all the answers in the last couple of hundred years.

The introduction to Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* sums this all up better than I could ever hope to, clearly defining the boundaries of theology, science, and

philosophy: “Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All definite knowledge — so I should contend — belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man’s Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man’s Land is philosophy.”

Street Poetry

The list of those who influenced my thinking on religion goes on, and we’ll give special attention to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Voltaire. This has less to do with the content of their writing and more with studying the patterns in each man’s life.

All three were voluminous authors. Dostoevsky wrote from 1844 to 1880, Tolstoy from 1847 to 1910, Voltaire from 1715 to 1778.

Putting aside the content of their individual works — I do not claim to have read them all, nor do I claim to have fully understood the ones I have read — what stands out is the topics they chose to write about at a given age.

I suppose I have a growing appreciation not just for the art a man creates, but what he was going through at the time he created it, which inspired a tweet I wrote about the late philosopher-king 2Pac:

“The story behind the recording of 2Pac’s “All Eyez on Me” is incredible. Walks out the prison gates, flies from NY to LA, starts recording that same day. Stays up all night and finishes “Ambitionz Az a Ridah” and “I Ain’t Mad at Cha” by sunrise. Records the entire album — hip-hop’s first ever double CD — in two weeks. Every single track was done in ONE TAKE. If the artist wasn’t ready, Pac told him he wasn’t on the track and sent him home. The only one who got an exception was Snoop, who was given 24 hours to go home and pen his shit. The album went certified DIAMOND with six million copies sold. Seven months later, Pac dies in a drive-by shooting. The music simply hits different with an appreciation for the circumstances surrounding the man at the time.”

As for the other three gentlemen, their later works were almost entirely concerned with God and the existence of God.

Struggles in Spirituality

With Dostoevsky, we see this in *Brothers Karamazov*, which he published four months before dying. It is a complex goddamn read but the entire book is driven by philosophical discussions of God and of human morality. He was always religious, but in his earlier years he was influenced by his involvement in the Petrashevsky Circle, a radical group of intellectuals, revolutionaries and atheists who denounced the Orthodox Church and the Tsar. Dostoevsky’s involvement in this group led to his arrest in 1849 and his infamous *faux-execution*, where he was sentenced to death by firing squad, blindfolded, and strapped to a pillar. At the very last second, the Tsar commuted his sentence and he was instead sent off

to a Siberian prison camp for four years of hard labor. He returned a profoundly spiritual man.

Voltaire's life story has some similarities and is captivating in its own way. He was educated by Jesuits at a young age, but went on to become one of the loudest voices in the Enlightenment's "freethinker" movement, a group which shared some similarities to the Petrashevsky Circle in their atheism and disdain for the established order. Voltaire went on to spend much of his life openly challenging the existence of God and leading a full-blown war against the Catholic Church. This period of history, leading up to the French Revolution, is fascinating in that some of the most brilliant thinkers to ever exist attempted to implement a moral code that wasn't reliant on religion. It failed. It has always failed. Regardless, at the end of his life Voltaire circled all the way back around: in 1774, at age eighty, he woke up early, climbed a hill with a friend to watch the sunrise, and exclaimed: *O mighty God, I believe!*

The third is Tolstoy, specifically his book, *A Confession*. It is a brief autobiography that explores his journey through philosophy and religion, written in 1880 when he was around age 50. By that point, he had already written *War and Peace* (1867) and *Anna Karenina* (1878) and enjoyed wealth, fame and career success. He had grown up religious, but like Dostoevsky and Voltaire, went through periods of skepticism and disillusionment. In *A Confession*, Tolstoy starts looking for the deeper meaning of life, reading the philosophy of Socrates, of Solomon, of Buddha and of Schopenhauer, four of the greatest thinkers of all time. Tolstoy's understandable conclusion from these studies is that life is meaningless, and he starts grappling with suicide. What saves him — of all

things — is the simple lives of the Russian peasantry. Tolstoy sees how God is the answer for everything in their lives, how God helps them through hardship and how God gives their lives meaning. He becomes a deeply spiritual man from then on.

Putting it all together, my conclusion was, well, if these three brilliant thinkers all eventually arrived at God one way or another, I may as well save myself all the struggle they went through and arrive there now.

That's the second angle — the intellectual one.

For the first angle, the life experience one, I've just had enough moments where I fully relent, including the scene depicted on the cover of *Blind Spots*:

"I waded back into the ocean and swam out a quarter-mile, treading water under the stars, and I looked up at the night sky. I'm grateful to you for watching over me, Lord. I'm grateful for everything in my life and beyond grateful for everything you have blessed me with. If you give me nothing more from this day forward, I am a contented man. Thank you. That night, I slept soundly for the first time in years."

The Answer to Every Question

In 2021 and 2022, I was doing volunteer work, teaching English as a Second Language. There was a Haitian woman named Guerdalyne in my class who had been through an incredibly difficult life, growing up surrounded by poverty and violence and death. And yet every time she came to class, she was smiling. Always grateful to God, always blessed, always thankful for all that He gave her. I wouldn't say it was Tolstoy's Russian peasant moment, but it wasn't far from it,

either, just repeatedly witnessing the power of God to help people in horrible situations cope with the random and inexplicable cruelties of life.

After that, I experienced several moments of complete powerlessness over the next few years, behind concrete walls and barbed wire, where I realized I had no control over anything. I'd hear about friends and family going through difficult times, where I'd normally be able to help control the outcome, but now, there was nothing I could do but pray to God to watch over everyone. This same feeling of powerlessness struck two of my close friends at different times. One had a bizarre stroke and was laid up in the hospital, praying to God to help restore his health. The other friend had a son who was born earlier than expected, and he spent the next three weeks sleeping on the floor of the NICU with nothing he could do to affect the outcome except fervently pray to God.

It reminded me of a quote from a writer named Charles Péguy: "God speaks only to those who act — to soldiers, to revolutionaries, and to those who place their lives at stake."

I look at the people I know who have become fervent believers, and I see the truth of that statement. God doesn't visit the guy sitting on his couch all day scrolling Instagram. It's always the guys who have lived life to the fullest, taken enormous risks and survived near-death experiences that recognize God's splendor.

Mostly, I have just found that there isn't a question that can't be answered by the existence of God. Every part of regulating your own conduct becomes much easier. Stop

worrying about what other people think; wake up, do right by God, and go to bed that night knowing you did your best.

I leave you with a quote from Pascal: “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God, the Creator...God has willed to make Himself quite recognizable by those; and thus, willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart.”

Serve God, serve something higher, and watch as the rest of your life magically falls into place.