

## **A God for Atheists Theology Beyond Personhood**

By  
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*In the Garden* is my favorite of the old gospel hymns, for both its soothing melody, and its utopian imagery of a creator who is intimately engaged with the world and its children.

I come to the garden alone  
While the dew is still on the roses  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear  
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me and He talks with me  
And He tells me I am His own  
And the joy we share as we tarry there  
None other has ever known.

He speaks and the sound of His voice  
Is so sweet that the birds hush their singing  
And the melody that He gave to me  
Within my heart is ringing.

And He walks with me and He talks with me  
And He tells me I am His own  
And the joy we share as we tarry there  
None other has ever known.

This dreamy theology of a tangible, immanent, engaged, incarnate God, is precisely what we should expect of such a being if it truly exists—*Immanuel*, “God is with us.” As it turns out, in fact, this particular hymn, written in 1912 by C. Austin Miles, which I’ve always taken to refer to the mythical Garden of Eden, is actually meant to reflect Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane after his resurrection. But this, of course, evokes the entire problem of God; if God is with us, and is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there such suffering in the world? And if Jesus, in particular, is God, why, after saving the world 2000 years ago, is it still such a mess today?

It is only in awakening from the fantasy of paradise, from the perfect world of his dreams, *Utopia* (which literally means, “no place”), to recognize the reality of poverty, suffering, and death, that Siddhartha becomes Buddha, the Enlightened One. Is it any wonder, then, so many would prefer to live in the matrix of their fantasy garden, in which a benevolent divinity is present to make everything better? Must we abandon the constructs of our minds, our defense mechanisms, just as young Prince Siddhartha had to leave the confines of his triple-thick walls, designed

to shield him from the world outside, the real world; only to awaken to such a miserable, unbearable truth, that there is only heartache and loss?

I'd stay in the garden with Him  
Though the night around me be falling,  
But he bids me go;  
Through the voice of woe,  
His voice to me is calling.

Yes, yes, night around us falls and we must go from him—we must leave our garden, the delusion of our hearts—into the world of darkness and woe, into a world without God. But is this really such an unbearable task? There is, after all, also much joy and pleasure and contentment in the real world—Middle Earth—the human realm. There is laughter, and love, and beauty, and wonder, and so many other riches beyond imagination. But what good is there in being an Earthling if we do not firmly plant ourselves here, on this Earth, grounding ourselves in the realm that is our own? If we ignore the suffering around us in favor of our ideals and fantasies, then suffering will forever remain merely the problem of a God who doesn't seem to be around. But suffering is part of the human condition, it is a human problem, and so it is really our problem to deal with. As Jesus himself said, "Heaven is among you." If we want paradise, it's up to us to make it happen, but we can't do this unless we're ready to first face reality. Like Siddhartha, we have to own up to the pain and injustices in the world if we're going to do anything about them. It is not God who must be come incarnate, but humanity. We must come to fully occupy our bodies in this time and place.

Although this is obviously a humanist position, it is also decidedly atheist. But, like Erich Fromm, who referred to himself as an "atheistic mystic," I like to consider myself paradoxically, as an "atheist who believes in God." You see, as much as I'd like to put my faith in the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful, all-present being—as much as I cherish the nostalgic feelings of innocence conjured within me when I hear songs like, *In the Garden*—I have seen too much of reality to indulge my fantasies. I cannot, based upon my sensual experiences and sound reason, believe such a being exists, at least not here in this world.

But my problem with God is precisely this, the notion of God as a person. God is not an eternal entity who exists in some invisible realm that thinks and feels and conspires a plan for my life, or has a design for human history. Such a being is no more real than Santa Claus, and, for that matter, seems far less jolly. The truth is, throughout human history, this so-called, personal savior, has been portrayed as more of a tyrant than someone I'd care to stroll through a Garden with. As biologist Richard Dawkins so succinctly puts it in his book, *The God Delusion*, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." This

view of God, as a menacing control freak, represents what psychologist Erich Fromm considered the most base level of theological development. Referring to this as the “anthropomorphic” stage, in which we envision God to be like us, a person, he says, “In the beginning of this development we find a despotic, jealous God, who considers man, whom he created, as his property, and is entitled to do with him whatever he pleases.”<sup>1</sup> And because we tend to treat others the way we think God treats us, this view has led to all manner of injustice against the Earth and its creatures, including our fellow human beings.

Yet, if someone were to ask me if I believe in God, I have no trouble saying *yes*. For it is not God that I disbelieve in, but the *personhood* of God. But I can look out into a room full of people and say, *yes*, I believe. I can go for a walk in the woods, or beside a riverbed, or in the mountains, and say, *yes*, I’m a believer. I can see an infant smile and know God exists. I can study the mysteries of evolution, the workings of biology, and the origins of our Universe and say, *God yes*, I believe!

But the difference for me is that God is not a person, but a force, or, better yet, a relationship. God is love. God is truth. God is justice. God is life itself. It is true, that some people move beyond the despotic idea of God, only to anthropomorphically describe it as a benevolent and caring person, “But the development goes further,” writes Fromm, “than transforming God from the figure of a despotic tribal chief into a loving father... In this development God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; he becomes the symbol of the principle of unity behind the manifoldness of phenomena...”<sup>2</sup> For this reason, he goes on to write, “God cannot have a name. A name always denotes a thing, or a person, something finite. How can God have a name, if he is not a person, not a thing?”<sup>3</sup>

So, as we evolve theologically, like children whose common sense eventually defies their belief in Santa Claus, we should eventually outgrow our primitive view of God as a control freak, or even as a loving parent for that matter, and come to recognize the unifying force permeating all life and every being. And though it may be just a matter of semantics, that we need not refer to this unifying force as God at all, but can satisfy ourselves to call it truth, or justice, or love, or life, or whatever, I don’t mind calling it God because I think this best reflects where I’m at theologically.

Whatever we call it, however, there is a further point that ought to be understood; that these principles, truth, justice, love, life, or others like them, are only as good as they are live out among us! To devote ourselves to irrelative concepts is really no different than devoting ourselves to a fictional entity named God, or Jehovah, or Allah, or Brahma, or anything else. To believe in love, and not live it out, is no different than believing in Yahweh and not obeying his

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<sup>1</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1956, 1972, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

commandments, or in Jesus, and not following his teachings. If we're going to devote ourselves to a god, it must be a real God, an incarnate God who is with us right here, right now. I think this is what Jesus was getting at when he said, "Whenever two or more are gathered in my name, I am in their midst,"<sup>4</sup> as when he said, "Heaven is among you."<sup>5</sup> The highest theology is really a relational theology. It's the understanding that we create God within our midst in the way we relate to each other and to the Earth and our fellow creatures. So I can look out into our congregation and say, yes, Immanuel, God is with us, not as a person who walks with us in our melodic garden, but as the many people who share our joys and burdens together; as those who live out the principles we strive for through our relationships with each other.

God is not, as Fromm says, a thing, or a person with a name. Nor is it an objective concept to mull over and over in our minds as we live separate from the companionship and responsibility of others. God dwells, for this atheist, in our midst, that is, in the relationship between us. In this sense, yes, God is very real, thick, sensual, and tangible. And, I dare say, any God that is not so obvious, not so present and real, is not worth acknowledging. Yes, we can walk with God in the garden, but the song still gets it wrong, for we cannot "come to the garden *alone*," to walk and talk with God—we must come *together*, for it is only together, through living out our highest principles in our relationships that God becomes manifest.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 18:20

<sup>5</sup> Luke 17:21