

Materialism Pt. 4 of 4

“Jesus, help me find my proper place
Jesus, help me find my proper place
Help me in my weakness
Cause I’m falling out of grace.
Jesus. Jesus.”

~The Velvet Underground, “Jesus” (1968)

I confess I had a difficult time choosing an open song lyric for this final segment, if only because explicit Christian themes are rare in rock music (it does happen, however). Yet that world contains many artists who have engaged in intense self-exploration often reaching out to a spiritual reality even if by accident. Lou Reed (1942 – 2013), author of the above lyrics, is an example. He had clearly seen the seamy side of human existence including from the standpoint of a heroin addiction when he was in his early 20s. The song cited above sounds surprisingly like a prayer for someone who was not a Christian (I am assuming). Reed’s music has always struck me as that of an observer and seeker, someone commenting on the dark side of human life as if from a vantage point somewhere above.

According to materialists, there is no “vantage point somewhere above,” of course. There is just this world, and whatever neural synapses are firing in your brain. The New Atheism (Dawkins, et al) has reiterated Nietzsche’s “God is dead” by proclaiming the impending death of Christianity.

I wouldn’t hold my breath. The Soviets spent over 70 years trying to eradicate Christianity by force; the Maoists, in China, also tried to wipe it out. It is true that, e.g., church attendance is dropping on the part of millennials, a source of commentary on Christianity losing ground in the U.S. It is incompatible with the political correctness that dominates the mindset of millennial students, for sure. But

Christianity is the fastest growing religion elsewhere in the world, such as (ironically) in Russia and China. Why would anyone think Christianity is going away voluntarily? What we should be thinking about is where the Christian worldview stands in the present, and what its future might be.

What is the Christian worldview? It stands, as I argue in *Four Cardinal Errors*, in sharp contrast to the materialist worldview. Here are some proposals.

1- God exists, as a Being who transcends space, time, and causality. The things of God, including morality, transcend space, time, and causality. God created the world of space, time, and causality. Logos and Ethos (logicality and morality) are inseparable aspects of God's eternal nature. God's existence is a starting point, not a conclusion of our reasoning.

2- There is therefore the world of space, time, and causality – the world of human experience and of science – and whatever noumenal realm exists “beyond” these, outside possible human experience. Neither reality nor God are limited to space, time, and causality. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951) would say we are pushing at the limits of language. In a sense, he was correct. But limits to human language and understanding do not limit reality. In the last analysis, God's nature as both one God and as “three persons” (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) are mysteries, as is how Creation was accomplished, how our free will operates, and possibly how consciousness itself works. Positivism and scientism disliked and distrusted mysteries. Materialists believed they had explained them. Rorty, who also admired Wittgenstein, believed the problems were artifacts of our insistence on “mentalistic” language. But some recent philosophers of mind – Colin McGinn (1950 –) is an example – now sound very Kantian in concluding that consciousness has remained fundamentally mysterious despite decades of hard, patient, sustained inquiry and analysis ... because our reason

just isn't structured so as to fathom its mysteries. If materialism is false, the mysteriousness of consciousness makes perfect sense! It just can't be forced-fitted into the materialist conceptual straightjacket!

3- What science does it does reasonably well, when not corrupted by politics or other sources of dollars. Again, though, science is designed to answer questions and solve problems in this world. Again as Kant showed, it cannot address metaphysical problems, any more than can reason itself. Reason, though its starting point is Logos, is human, all too human, is finite therefore, and not designed to reach or grasp an eternal God. From what successes science has enjoyed it does not follow logically that this world, the world of space, time, and causality where science and technology operate, exhausts reality.

4- According to Christianity human beings were created in God's image. Hence the fundamental ontological and moral differences between us and the rest of the Creation. As St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) put it, our reason is an imprint of God's eternal nature within us. Thus we have the finite capacity to acquire knowledge of the Creation, whether through science or rational insight.

5- The Christian worldview's diagnosis of the human condition is not ignorance but sin: the fact that the first humans (whether we read Genesis literally or not) turned away from God. They believed they could do better on their own, autonomously. They were wrong. Sin corrupts everything, including the quest for truth. Most thinkers have sought to avoid any frank discussion of sin. The idea flies in the face of the idea of human perfectibility, or at least of indefinite improvability by our own efforts, legacies of the Enlightenment. But any honest, empirical look at ourselves ought to suggest that we cannot save ourselves, or improve ourselves wholesale as ethical beings. We can make small improvements here and there, akin to learning to bathe; most

of us tend to behave better when we are comfortable and when our stomachs are full. But morality is simply not our “default setting”; it should be obvious that even children can be hideously cruel to classmates who do not “fit in.” While many of us adults doubtless mean well because we have internalized moral principles to some degree, others among us remain pretty much untouched by these niceties. We try to devise systems of rules that operate under the assumption that the desire to do good should be a primary motivator, when it usually isn’t. Most of us have little interest in what does not affect us directly, or bring us benefits. All of us have our lapses, some of which are truly breathtaking! Secularists believe we can be autonomous, but absent an external moral compass, we often just act as destroyers, of others if not ourselves, whether on the grand scale of the wars of choice in the Middle East or the small but from the victim’s standpoint all-too-real one of the teenager who is bullied or cyberbullied until she commits suicide. Unless such things happen to one of our own, we drift with the herd, with the quiet secularists Peter Watson noted.

6- Christian ethics are found in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. Yes, there are often problems interpreting what we perceive God’s will to be, and religious communities are bound to disagree over specifics. But the problems understanding what Christianity requires of us surely pale next to the failure of secular ethical theories, and of secularism more broadly. One thing is crystal clear: Christian salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ who alone promises salvation from the consequences of sin (Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; John 3:16; elsewhere), something we cannot do ourselves (Ephesians 2:8–9; elsewhere). Recognizing that if we try to start with ourselves we get nowhere, and that our ability to get nowhere on our own is entirely consistent with what we observe in history and society, are good places to begin one’s appreciation of Christian ethics, or of the Christian worldview generally.

Christians do not get everything right, of course. The Christian does not cease to sin nor even to suffer the consequences of sin; the most he can do is confess sins, and turn away gratefully acknowledging God's forgiveness. What Christians get wrong could fill a separate article: failure in their families; failure to care for their neighbors and fellow citizens as God commands (Jesus did not say to treat the sick only if you can make a profit doing so); failure to care for the Creation itself, over which God gave humanity dominion, which means assuming moral responsibility, not destructive plundering; and more besides.

But these human failures do not give us an argument against Christianity and for materialism, which in the end gives us no basis for condemning any of these failures other than expedient ones.

What of other faiths? some might ask. I was born in the U.S. (grew up in Atlanta), and have been surrounded by Christians for much of my life (except for time spent in universities surrounded by materialists). Suppose I'd been born in, say Baghdad. Would I not be writing my condemnations of Western materialism as part of my submission to Allah, as a devout Muslim scholar (the word Islam means submission)? Would I not be a Hindu or possibly a Buddhist, had I been born in, say, India? Or a Confucian, had I been born in Tibet?

There are no easy answers to such questions. I do not know if Christians can have the best answers to them, as those answers (obviously) presuppose Christianity and to a logical mind, will sound circular. The fact that everyone considers his/her religion to be "the right one" is a given; no one would believe in his/her faith otherwise. Other faiths stand at the center of other worldviews, of course, non-Western ones in most cases. That means (by definition) they are not widely represented in those regions of the world identified as "the West." High or low representation has no logical implications for truth or falsity, however.

Technology, a product of the West, has brought these different worldviews into the same meeting space as never before, however: cyberspace, which transcends the fact that some of us are able to travel anywhere and experience the cultural embodiments of other worldviews firsthand.

The thing to do, it seems to me, is to encourage interfaith dialogue as never before, conducted respectfully and with an eye to seeing what is similar, and not being so eager to focus on what is different. And looking to the future rather than dwelling on the errors of the past. The world needs people both able and willing to communicate, especially with divisive and destructive personalities everywhere. We can then show how the world looks to Christians, and present what we believe is true in Christianity.

This, we must add, goes along with acting as Jesus Christ would have as act, in accordance with His words during the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere: for example, working to ensure that impoverished peoples here and afar have food to eat, whatever their beliefs, and to help them learn those practices that will help them feed themselves. Words without deeds, after all, are idle chatter. Having attended to such matters, the most constructive thing we can do is to step aside and trust God to do His work.

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