The boat was still docked. I had gotten there early, hoping to find a spot on the upper deck where I could get a clear view of the ceremony below. Once in my seat, I was able to properly survey my surroundings. A makeshift altar stood on the lower deck with banners hung behind it: “Women as Priests—Nothing New!” Next to the entrance was a table covered with calendars, pamphlets, and bookmarks with pictures of flaking ancient mosaics, accompanied by explanations of what these mosaics meant in terms of women’s roles in the early church. Looking out the window next to me, I saw that a small group of protesters had gathered on the dock holding signs: “Jesus Was a Man” and “Women Obey Priests.”

It was the first American ordination ceremony of a group called Roman Catholic Womenpriests, held this past July in Pittsburgh. As the name suggests, women who are members believe that they are called by God to become Roman Catholic deacons and priests. Since the Vatican maintains a staunch opposition to such claims, the ceremonies and the ordinations they claim to perform are hotly contested among church officials and members of the laity. All such ceremonies take place on boats, a characteristic the group associates with the fluidity and change it is working to effect in church policy. Sitting on the boat that day (literally seeing both sides of the issue), I thought about the privileging of viewpoints that often occurs in discussions about religion. Who, for example, is better able to judge the nature of religion—the academic or the believer? What constitutes more valid evidence—text or archaeology? What group has the right to effect changes of policy—religious officials or the laity? In the end, how fluid is religious truth?

Ziggurat is an attempt to break down those dichotomies and create a space where these divergent voices can come into conversation with each other. In light of our project, the words of a fellow spectator at the ceremony become all the more meaningful. While the boat sailed up and down the three rivers of Pittsburgh, a Presbyterian minister sitting next to me explained the curious hydrography of the area. While many people know that the city is built on the convergence of the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monangahela Rivers, fewer are aware of a fourth, underground river. At the spot where all four converge, city planners built a public park with a large fountain tapped into the waters of this fourth river. This spot belonged to everyone. Maybe as someone who studies religion, she said, I would be able to understand the significance of that. -K.S.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Warmest Supporters of the Prophet</td>
<td>Zindzi McCormick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Lion’s Den</td>
<td>Shira Danan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Contemplative Judaism</td>
<td>Sam Berrin Shonkoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Pakaluk</td>
<td>Andrew Marantz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Fruitcake</td>
<td>Sonia Saraiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the End Blows</td>
<td>Travis Mushett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Proving What We See With the Eyes of Love</td>
<td>Nathan Schneider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83</td>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*cover illustration by Jessica Taylor*
*photo series “Reverence” by Mariya Masyukova*
Z I G G U R A T

Fall 2006

Volume 2, Number 1

Contributing Supporters
Dean of the College
Department of Religious Studies
Office of the President
Office of the Chaplains and Religious Life
Office of Institutional Diversity
Religious Studies
Departmental Undergraduate Group
Vice President for Campus Life and Student Services

Business Manager
Grace Cunningham

Publicity Manager
Robert Kaufman

all organizations are affiliated with Brown University

Associate Editors
Thea Cohen • Max Dunfey • Andrea Gomes • Peter King • Jessica Laser • Jenny Schneider • Sam Shonkoff • Andrea Titus • Nick Van Sant • Jeremy Zeitlin

Ziggurat
Brown University
Box 1930
Providence, RI 02912

We publish twice a year, in the Fall and in the Spring. Letters, inquiries, and submissions from all quarters may be directed to ziggurat@brown.edu.

Printed by Brown Graphic Services
© 2006 Ziggurat

Read Ziggurat online at
http://www.brown.edu/ziggurat
THE WARMEST SUPPORTERS OF THE PROPHET
Reincorporating Women and Gender into the Analysis of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement in South Africa, 1856-7

Zindzi McCormick

In 1856, as British colonialism expanded into Xhosaland in South Africa, the words of a young Xhosa girl named Nongqawuse would lead to greater and swifter devastation of the Xhosa people than ever before. Nongqawuse, a teenager at the time, prophesied to the Xhosa that they must kill all their cattle and cease to cultivate their land. Incorporating elements of Christian theology and Xhosa tradition, and playing on fears of colonialism, her prophecy would lead to the deaths of tens of thousands of people and hundreds of thousands of livestock in the months to come.

In April 1856 Nongqawuse, a teenaged, orphaned, Xhosa girl, heard her name called by two strangers while she tended the fields of her uncle’s farm. Two strangers approached her from behind a bush, entrusting her with a message to relate to her uncle, Mhlakaza, upon returning home:
Tell that the whole community will rise from the dead; and that all cattle now living must be slaughtered, for they have been reared by contaminated hands because there are people about who deal in witchcraft...There should be no cultivation, but great new grain pits must be dug, new houses must be built, and great strong cattle enclosures must be erected. Cut out new milksacks and weave many doors from buka roots. So says the chief Napakade, the descendent of Sifuba-sibanzi. The people must leave their witchcraft, for soon they will be examined by diviners.¹

Four days after Nongqawuse’s first encounter, after ritually purifying himself, Mhlakaza went with his niece to meet the strangers. The two men spoke through Nongqawuse:
They told him that they were the people often spoken of in former days by [Nxele] and Umlanjeni, as being a strong people, who would in the course of time render the [Xhosa] the assistance they required in driving the white men out of the land…and in order that this may be carried into effect, they must prove themselves deserving by acting up to their commands, which are, first to throw away all bewitching matter – second, to kill all their cattle, so as to be stocked with others that are free from any disease.  

The numerical scale of the disaster caused by the ensuing Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement of 1856–7 is clear. In one year, 40,000 Xhosa people died of starvation, another 150,000 people were displaced, 400,000 cattle were slaughtered, and over half a million acres of land were lost by the Xhosa.  

Scholars have probed into and surmised three main reasons for this movement: the threat to the Xhosa of war and land loss caused by colonialism, the integration of Christian ideas into the traditional Xhosa belief system, and the devastation caused by lungsickness on Xhosa cattle herds. Yet, in all of this analysis, inadequate attention is paid to the exact identity of who is associated with the cattle-killing movement. Who was the prophetess who spurred this movement and to whom did her prophecies speak? Despite otherwise quite sophisticated analyses of political, religious, social, and environmental conditions in Xhosa society that influenced this millenarian movement, most key authors and historians have side-stepped the implication of Nongqawuse’s identity as a woman and the gender-conscious analysis that should follow.

As Helen Bradford aptly points out in her study of the cattle-killings, it is necessary to reenlist gender as a tool of analysis in understanding the Cattle-Killing.  

Nongqawuse’s prophecies and the Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement are commonly described and explained in the context of the colonial oppression and exploitation of the Xhosa people during the nineteenth century. Yet any discussion of the importance of analyzing Nongqawuse’s prophecies and teachings with specific attention to her position as a young Xhosa woman is ignored, despite that the very stuff of her prophecies suggests it: cattle and grain are goods fundamentally linked with women, as bridewealth and a source of labor, respectively. In order to fully understand the Cattle-Killings, the movement must be looked at within the context of gender, as well as that of colonialism, the
advent of Christianity in southern Africa, and the epidemic lungsickness that affected cattle at the time. Adding the dimension of gender to these analyses allows for a more thorough, subtle and complex appreciation of the 1856-57 Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement.

There are many descriptions of millennial movements that can be applied to the Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement. First and foremost, the Cattle-Killings are a “nativist millennial movement.” As a people “under attack by a foreign colonizing government that [was] destroying their traditional way of life, their culture and religion, and [was] taking away their land and means of survival,” the Xhosa certainly fell under this category in the mid-nineteenth century. At this point, they had suffered through eight frontier wars. This series of conflicts began with clashes between the Xhosa people and the white trekboers, who entered the Eastern Cape in the late eighteenth century. While encounters between the Xhosa and the white farmers were initially peaceful, disputes over land boundaries soon escalated into violent confrontations. These wars continued over a period of one hundred years, although Dutch colonizers gave way to British ones at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The border between white and Xhosa lands shifted ever eastward as growing numbers of white settlers moved into the area. As Peires writes, at the onset of the Cattle-Killing movement, the Xhosa were:

An exceptionally battered and divided society, demoralized by the frustration of a long series of military defeats; by the social insecurity of expulsion from natal lands and pastures; by the material sufferings of migrant labour and of resettlement in cramped and ecologically deficient locations; by the new wealth of those who had climbed on the military-commercial bandwagon of settler expansionism.

These conditions of deteriorating economic and social structure among the Xhosa proved fertile ground for a millennial movement such as the Cattle-Killings. Despondent due to the ongoing border wars and major land loss, the Xhosa were eager to accept a prophecy that promised their return to power and the vanquishing of the colonizers.

Furthermore, the Cattle-Killing movement can be categorized as a form of catastrophic millennialism. This form of millennialism is defined by the belief that society is beyond repair such that “the old must be swept away to initiate the new condition.” The condition of Nongqawuse’s
prophecy that dictated that all old cattle and grain must be destroyed naturally aligns the Cattle-Killing movement with this definition of catastrophic millennialism. Interesting and more complex, however, are the roots of Nongqawuse’s claim that the “new condition” that would be ushered in would be brought by the resurrection of the dead ancestors. It is likely that this particular aspect of the prophecy is intimately intertwined with the dawn and spread of Christianity in Xhosaland, and its complex relationship with indigenous Xhosa beliefs, particularly those surrounding relationships with ancestors. Christian missionary work began in Xhosaland in 1817, yet yielded few real conversions. Elements of Christian doctrine did, however, disperse and absorb into Xhosa society. The integration of Christian ideas, particularly those relevant to Nongqawuse’s prophecy, into the traditional Xhosa belief system is in fact the product of the greatest of coincidences. A smallpox epidemic in the 1770s led to the disruption of Xhosa funeral practices, as healthy family members were so afraid to touch the dead that they instead drove the dying out of the homestead, thereby eliminating the possibility of a traditional burial. This practice was perpetuated in order to avoid the “religious necessity of abandoning a homestead where a death had occurred.”

This new practice, in combination with the increasing overcrowding of the population, dismantled traditional spatial distinctions between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Traditionally in Xhosa society, ancestors inhabited the space where they died, and from their parallel spirit world were thought to actively affect the living. Ancestors could not, however, cross from the spirit to the living world. With the dawn of colonialism, the intersection of Xhosa beliefs about the active role of the ancestors and Christian beliefs about resurrection were melded into a new worldview for the Xhosa people. This altered practice created the intellectual room in which ideas such as the concept of resurrection as a return of the ancestors could be integrated into Xhosa beliefs. It was most likely Mhlakaza, who was in fact the first Anglican Xhosa, who introduced these ideas to Nongqawuse:

Since Mhlakaza was conversant with the concept of Christian resurrection, it seems not unlikely that this particular element, generally absent from traditional religions, was either clarified or initially, possibly even prior to Nongqawuse’s experience, suggested
With the introduction of Christian beliefs of resurrection to the Xhosa people also came the appropriation of these ideas into Nongqawuse’s prophecy. In this context, it “seems clear then that Nongqawuse’s promised resurrection of healthy animals and the return of the ancestors...was situated well within the general Xhosa view of the cosmos.” Just as the “nativist” characteristics of the Cattle-Killing millennial movement were in reaction to European colonization, the “catastrophic” elements of this movement were made possible by the integration of European religious beliefs into Xhosa ones.

Finally, with respect to the Cattle-Killing movement, the Xhosa can be classified as a fragile millennial group. Fragile millennial groups tend to initiate violence in response to threatening internal weakness and cultural opposition. After decades of war, the infiltration of a new culture into their homeland and a devastating smallpox epidemic, all of which were European in origin, the Xhosa were certainly fragile. The last element that would compound the urgency of their fragility was a devastating epidemic of lungsickness that reached Xhosaland in 1855. From the inside out, the devastation of this disease crippled the Xhosa, decimating their cattle stocks. The impact on the Cattle-Killings of this disease, which was highly infectious, fast-spreading and could only be stopped by killing infected animals, is obvious: “The form which the movement took, namely the killing of cattle, was suggested and determined by the lungsickness epidemic of 1854.”

Scholarly work about the Xhosa Cattle-Killings agrees almost uniformly on the importance of the Frontier Wars, early African Christianity and lungsickness in laying the groundwork for the enormous momentum of action to which the prophecies of Nongqawuse led. Yet, there had been previous Xhosa prophets under similar conditions, even ones who had demanded the slaughter of cattle, suggesting that Nongqawuse’s ideas were not original. Most historians believe that it was the heightened level of panic that lungsickness brought to the Xhosa that ultimately made this prophecy more effective, yet they do not delve into why the devastation of cattle in particular was so problematic at the time. As Helen Bradford suggests, but only minimally explores, the reasons for this likely lie in the connection between cattle and bridewealth, the
implications for male sexuality of Nongqawuse’s prophecies and the role of women as agricultural laborers.

Women in Xhosa society were regarded as essential to the continuity of the community, but were nonetheless excluded from male-dominated positions of authority and were considered inferior to men. Women moved from their natal homes to live with their husband’s family upon marriage, and a bride price was paid to their own family in exchange for their labor and fertility. In 1848, “bridewealth had recently risen to ten oxen: completely out of reach for most homesteads.” This exorbitant price was even more dramatic in the face of the lungsickness epidemic, which caused losses of about 5,000 cattle per month. In some areas, two out of every three cattle died. While occasional homesteads escaped unscathed, others’ herds were devastated. This context brings some perspective to the question, “Why was slaughter of stock being urged by ‘a mere girl who has nothing to do with cattle?’” Cattle were an important sign of wealth for the Xhosa, but more significantly, they were fundamentally linked to the status of women.

Recognizing that the traditional androcentric approach to the concept of cattle-killing is flawed is central to understanding the catastrophe of the Cattle-Killing movement in a fuller light. Dismantling the conceptualization of cattle as “objects entirely within the male domain” is essential to understanding Nongqawuse’s prophecy:

An adolescent, of marriageable age, had everything to do with cattle. The taboos surrounding her association with stock were intimately connected with the ‘symbolic association of women’s reproductive functions with the cattle of the lineage.’… [H]ints in sources suggest that incorporating reproduction, sexuality and marriage into analyses is crucial.

For a young, unmarried woman, the decimation of the Xhosa cattle herds was particularly noteworthy—it correlated with the potential deconstruction of traditional male-female relationships and representations of power. Bradford describes comparable literature about a rinderpest scourge that destroyed cattle herds in southern and eastern Africa, where “one of the cries was: ‘No more cattle, no more marriages, how shall we marry?’” Evidence shows that while the number of marriages decreased, pre-
marital pregnancies increased. The havoc wreaked by the deconstruction of traditional patriarchal and patrilineal constructions of power due to the excessive loss of cattle would have probably been more threatening to the Xhosa than any settler war or loss of land. It seems therefore possible that addressing and diminishing the dramatic effects of the loss of cattle, and therefore bridewealth, lies at the root of Nongqawuse’s prophecies.

The declaration that the cattle must be killed because they had been reared by “contaminated hands” and were branded by “witchcraft” further links Nongqawuse’s prophecy to male–female power dynamics in Xhosa society by condemning male sexual offences. Nongqawuse’s declaration that the cattle were contaminated accused men, who were responsible for cattle, of being “involved in witchcraft, fornication, incest, adultery and ‘other things.’”23 These sexual transgressions against women, which were often ignored in Xhosa society—for example, “married men typically had lovers, for which wives could obtain no redress”—were suddenly deemed so atrocious that all cattle had been defiled and had to be destroyed.24 Perhaps under the influence of the infusion of Christian morality into Xhosa society, as well as the threat of the disintegration of Xhosa families and communities because of violent conflict and extensive land loss, these behaviors took on new meaning. Again, by probing into the real significance of and connections between different elements of Nongqawuse’s prophecy, its complexity is revealed. Beyond the difficulty of maintaining land, power, and culture in the face of colonialism, the Xhosa faced threats to the structures of their gender hierarchy and social order. These disruptions, although little recognized, were equally fundamental in providing a basis for the Cattle-Killing movement.

Yet another element of the Cattle-Killing that is more meaningful when approached through the lens of gender is Nongqawuse’s instruction that “there should be no cultivation.” This element of the prophecy is directly linked to women, who were the cultivators and were almost entirely responsible for agricultural labor. As one Xhosa missionary, Tiyo Soga, put it, “The women, the cultivators of the soil, were the warmest supporters of the prophet, as they rejoiced in the anticipation of getting crops without labor.”25 Although this seems a somewhat sexist statement, implying that women were lazy and quick to abandon their work, it is indeed likely that women, more so than men, felt the brunt of the loss
of arable land as Xhosa land holdings diminished and the population became more crowded. This meant that women had to work increasingly harder on increasingly less available and less fertile land—making it likely that women would welcome the suggestion that there was help on the way. Although initially suggesting that the Cattle-Killing movement "cut right across the spectrum of divergent interests in Xhosa society," Peires ultimately recognizes that it was women who "seem overwhelmingly to have supported the believers." It is not insignificant that it was largely women who followed Nongqawuse's teachings. As women gave up laboring in the fields, the loss of grain dramatically reduced food supplies. Many scholars consider this to be the most substantial factor leading to the following mass starvation, which led to 40,000 Xhosa deaths. Understanding the appeal of Nongqawuse's prophecies to women is crucial to understanding their effects—the cessation of female labor in the fields, far more so than the slaughter of cattle, is largely responsible for the devastation to the Xhosa population caused by the Cattle-Killing movement.

By exploring beyond the ungendered and therefore incomplete analyses of the Cattle-Killing movement that have been produced until now, the complexity of this millennial movement, as well as the logic behind it, is revealed in full force. Moving past the assumption that the Cattle-Killing movement had a "widespread and spontaneous appeal for the overwhelming majority of Xhosa," it becomes clear that the "overwhelming support" for the Cattle-Killings came from women, who were likely to benefit most from the permission—and in fact, encouragement—to abandon the toilsome labor of cultivation. Additionally, as colonial intrusion diminished the borders of Xhosaland, because of their centrality to the productivity and survival of Xhosa families and communities, it was women who suffered most directly under the increasing loss of and competition over arable land. Furthermore, the shrinking of the cattle herds of the Xhosa because of European colonization as well as the lungsickness epidemic remarkably affected women. The threatened loss of the wealth, namely cattle, fundamental to the creation of marriages and families endangered their status, which was ultimately linked to marriageability, fertility and the continuation of the patrilineal line. Exploring the implications of the language and
symbolism of the prophecy itself highlights that women were central to sustaining Xhosa society both through agricultural production, biological reproduction and social construction. Combining these elements of complexity with the traditionally understood roots of the Cattle-Killing movement explains the effectiveness of the movement with more dimensionality and thoroughness. The gender-based reasons for the Xhosa Cattle-Killings are intimately linked to the common arguments about the effects of colonialism on the movement. Issues of cattle and fertility were linked to the lungsickness epidemic, questions about male sexuality were a product of the integration of Christianity into Xhosa society, and women's increased frustration with the limitations of agricultural production was the result of loss of land to the colonial frontier. Integrating ideas of gender into common analyses of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement is not only important in incorporating the experiences of women into a traditionally androcentric historical narrative, but also, and consequently, in refining and completing our understanding of this movement as a historical event and religious movement. Just as Nongqawuse's prophecies went unfulfilled, so too would the realization of a complete analysis of the millenarian Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement without a gender-conscious interpretation.

Notes

2. Gqoba, cited in Peires 79.
ZIGGURAT

7. Peires 124.
12. Thorpe 87.
15. Peires 123.
17. Peires 173, Thorpe 77.
27. Bradford 361; Peires 319.
He remembered her hair from before she was married, how it hung in golden-brown waves down her back. He vividly remembered their first kiss behind a swing-set in his backyard. She had pulled his neck to her and kissed his face thickly. In the end, she had married Sam, and now he watched her set the table with the delight of a child, unwrapping the brand new dishes as she went, and he hoped a curl would fall out of her scarf, but not one did.

“Shall we have spirits?” she said. She smiled like nothing would delight her more, like cupcakes.

“Sure,” he said. If it would please you, anything.

Sarah was already unwrapping the little whiskey snuffers--still in their gift packaging from the wedding--and distributing them around the table. Everything about her was lavish and girly, her make-up applied rosy red on her cheeks, her black heels tied with bows, her apron trimmed with lace.

“So, what’s Batya like?” he asked.

“Oh, Batya. She’s wonderful. Really, I thought of you the instant I met her,” Sarah took a moment to sigh, the wrapping from the glasses pressed to her chest, before she turned back into the kitchen to dispose of them.
“Wonderful is not a very clear description.” He stood awkwardly by the table, pretending to browse the books on the living room shelves. “Where did you meet her again?”

Sarah came back into the living room carrying a bowl of salad.

“In Israel. She’s a friend of my second cousin Shifra. Please sit down, won’t you, just anywhere and make yourself comfortable.”

He sat down at one end of the couch.

“Would you like something to drink?” she beamed at him.

“I don’t know. Water’s fine, I guess.” Why did she have to act like they hadn’t known each other since kindergarten?

“Water,” she repeated, setting the salad bowl down on the table and wandering back into the kitchen. Sixteen years, and he couldn’t even just go into her kitchen and fix himself a drink.

She came back with a silver pitcher in one hand and a glass in another. Placing both on little coasters on the coffee table, she poured him water with one long slooping sound. The little beads of water hung onto the lip of the pitcher. She left him briefly and returned after a moment with mustard-flavoured pretzels in a basket. She stood there waiting for him to help himself.

“Err…thanks,” he said, scooping up a handful of pretzels.

“You’re welcome,” she said, sitting on the opposite side of the couch. “It’s so nice to see you, Daniel. I really did miss you in Jerusalem.” He had gone to his sister’s in Jerusalem for Pesach, hoping to see her, but she had left for the month, home to Brooklyn, and he had missed her altogether. It was all a question of timing with them. If only that kiss hadn’t been just before she left for Jerusalem. If only her mother didn’t resent his father for some comment in the synagogue bulletin fifteen years earlier. If only
he hadn’t been a year older than she, and had gone to Jerusalem at the same time as she had.

“I’m sorry I missed you over Pesach.”

She laughed. “Yes, that was just bad timing, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

Standing up, she laughed.

He laughed. “What are you laughing about?”

Still laughing: “I was just…never mind it’s silly.”

“I’d like to know.”

“I was just remembering”—she blushed, God did he love it when she blushed—“that day in your parent’s backyard.”

Dan forced himself to smile. “We were kids.”

“We were just kids,” she agreed.

“Yeah.”

“You’re really going to like Batya.”

He threw some pretzels into his mouth so he wouldn’t have to respond. The silence following her last comment was obscene. The door unlocked and Sam walked in.

“Sammy! Darling, how was work?” She skated across the brown carpet to him, relieving him of his coat and hat with a beatific smile on her face. She looked even daintier next to his broad-shouldered frame. He kissed her cheek, then walked over to Dan.
“It was fine. House smells good, what’s cooking? Dan, my good man, how are you?” The two men shook.

“Daniel is staying for dinner, remember? I want him to meet Batya,” Sarah called from the hall closet by the door. Dan grinned, and nodded at Sam to confirm his intentions.

“Yep,” he said. His voice sounded crackly and high. He cleared his throat. “How are you? Congratulations, by the way.”

“Haha, thanks a lot. Sit down, sit down, make yourself at home.” He gestured to the couch where Dan had been sitting a moment before. Dan sat. Sam sat, too. Sarah had gone back into the kitchen.

“Nice apartment.”

“Haha, thanks. My parents chipped in, just a little.”

“Well, it’s really nice.” Silence for a moment.

“So you’ve never met Batya?” Sam grinned, raising his eyebrows.

“Nope, you know her?”

“Me? No—”

“Yes you do!” Sarah called from the other room. “She was at the wedding and she’s been over twice since then!” She re-entered carrying a wooden spoon coated in cake batter and perched on the arm of Sam’s chair, looking baffled.

“Has she? Okay, I do know her then.” He laughed in Dan’s direction and Dan smiled.

“I can’t believe you don’t remember her.”
“Is that cake? Can I lick the spoon?”

“Oh, honestly Sammy you’re like a little child,” Sarah said indulgently. He reached over, grabbing the spoon with one hand, and her waist with the other, and licked the spoon. His tongue was big and shiny and Dan couldn’t help his features screwing up as though he had smelled something rotten. He turned as if to inspect the trinkets on the coffee table.

Sarah squealed and went back into the kitchen.

“So, Dan, what are you doing these days?”

“I’m getting a Masters in communications.”

“Want to be a journalist?”

“B’ezrat Hashem, yeah. Print journalism.”

“Newspaper, magazine?”

“Magazine, hopefully.”

The doorbell rang. Sarah called from the kitchen, “Sammy, can you get that?” Dan opened a book on the table—*Power of the Text*—intent on looking intently at its contents when the girl entered. Chapter three began with a quotation from Tehillim. Chapter thirty-seven, verse twenty-four. *Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand.*

“May I take your coat, m’lady?” She was tiny, with a bob of wavy brown hair, a long peasant skirt and glasses over brown eyes. She handed Sam her skinny silver jacket, and ran her fingers zig-zaggedly through her hair.

“Thank you Sam, I think I remember where it goes,” she replied with a smile.
“This is Dan Feinman,” Sam gestured.

“Nice to meet you,” Dan said. He waved.

“Hi Dan, nice to meet you, too,” she said, and crossed to shake his hand. About halfway across the room, she changed her mind, instead perching her idle hands on the back of the couch. She stood there, familiarly close, for a moment. Her eyes were under-circled by big cups and capped with long black lashes.

Sam smiled at them from the entryway. He raised his eyes at Dan. Dan looked back at Batya, who was now intently studying the back of the couch, pinching the fabric with her fingernails.

“I’ll just run and tell Sarah you’re here,” Sam said, and left, winking at Dan as he went.

“So you know Sarah from yeshiva,” Dan started.

“Yes, she’s great, isn’t she?” Batya smiled at the mention of Sarah, her mouth closed, her lips pursed together.

“Mm, she’s a nut” he agreed. She laughed, a careless laugh like toys clinking into a basket.

“A very sweet nut. She tells me you’re a journalist. Is that right?”

“Yeah, at least, I’m studying to be one.”

“Oh, I’m a journalist myself. A photographer for the Herald.”

“Are you? How’s that?” There was something about her hair, the shape of the waves.

“I enjoy it, but hopefully I won’t have to work forever.” She smiled shyly,
revealing a bit of a gap between her two front teeth.

_Had she really just said that?_ he wondered. _How fantastically forward._ Now as he had not responded, she looked embarrassed.

“So, who’s your favorite photographer?” he asked her quickly.

“Hmm. Ansel Adams.”

“Why him?”

“It’s a bit idolatrous, I suppose, but for some reason mountains always make me think of God.”

“That’s not idolatrous,” he laughed.

“I think because I had a Hebrew school teacher who said God was in nature, and everywhere, or something.”

Sarah walked in as they were still laughing, and looked with satisfaction from one to the other. She caught Dan’s eye and winked. He stopped laughing immediately.

Dinner conversation was a labored task, until Sam and Batya started playing Jewish Geography and confirmed that, between the two of them, they knew all the Jews in London, including three David Hoffmans. After dessert—a lemon cake Daniel hoped wasn’t secretly seasoned with Sam’s saliva—and benching, the four of them sat in the living room, talking politics. Sarah went back into the kitchen to start cleaning up, and insisted that no one assist her. He felt lethargic from the whiskey and the coffee, and all of the food, and was quite content to settle into a conversation with Sam and Batya. This mostly consisted of she and Dan teasing Sam about his lack of current events knowledge, as soon as they’d discovered he thought Mozambique was the president of South Africa.
“And Batya, you heard about that tragic firefly attack in Luxembourg?” he said.

“I’m not falling for this again,” Sam said, laughing. He grabbed a handful of nuts out of the bowl on the table, and started crunching.

“Yes, it was really sad. I think something like nine people were killed. It was on all the news stations this morning.” She looked down, shaking her head.

“Wait, really?” Sam looked incredulous.

Dan caught her eye, trying to keep a straight face.

“Wait, fireflies don’t bite, do they?”

Batya giggled like a naughty child, swinging her legs back and forth and sinking further into the couch. Sam threw the rest of the nuts at the two of them. His face was hurting from laughter. It was like being back in college again, the never-ending Friday nights at Hillel or in friends’ dorm rooms. Sarah came back in from the kitchen, and he forced himself not to look up at her.

“Sarah, did you hear about what happened in Luxembourg?” Sam began.

An hour later, he offered to walk Batya home.

“Oh, you really don’t need to. I live only just around the corner.”

“Which way?”

“Towards McDonald’s. Where do you live?”

“Near the park, but--”
“Oh see, you really don’t have to walk me home.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I…it’s the gentlemanly thing to do, right?”

They said goodbye to their hosts, and made their way out into the night. It was wet out, and chilly, and leaves were soggy on the ground. In the quiet, only the sound of their shoes made a noise. Out here in the cold, Dan felt less relaxed, suddenly aware of Batya beside him. But he was safe, too, in this enormous world. The trees alone seemed to go up forever, and there were streets beside this one, one after the other, across the entire city.

At her door, she offered him her hand, boyishly. He grabbed it, and—why not—he kissed it, setting off another collapse into giggles.

“I’ll tell Sarah not to give you whiskey next time,” she said, her face red.

“It’s not the whiskey,” he said, and then started laughing himself. It’s just this night.

Later, he dreamt of Sarah’s hair, falling out of the scarf on her head. She kept tucking it back in but it was falling free and loose like water. Why don’t you leave it uncovered? He asked. God is covered up, she said. Then, as if remembering something he had been taught long ago, Yes, that’s right, God is covered up because He is modest.
CONTEMPLATIVE JUDAISM

Sam Berrin Shonkoff

And he was there with YHWH forty days and forty nights. Bread he did not eat, nor water did he drink. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Words. And it happened when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the Covenant in Moses's hand when he came down from the mountain, that Moses did not know that the skin of his face had glowed when he spoke with Him. And Aaron, and all the Israelites, saw Moses, and, look, the skin of his face glowed, and they were afraid to come near him. And Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chiefs in the community came back to him, and Moses spoke to them.

Exodus 34: 28-32

It is said that every word of Torah has infinite meanings, but let us now reflect on one interpretation of this passage. Moses is hitbodedut, in total seclusion, which is an essential prerequisite for prophetic revelation. Without bread or water for forty days, he is clearly in an altered state of consciousness. As Moses directly experiences YHVH, he does not realize that his face is glowing. Thus, he lacks self-consciousness and his ego is dissolved during this encounter with the Divine. When Moses returns to his community, the Israelites are afraid to come near him, for he is glowing. The word used for “afraid” (yir’ah) in this passage is also used to express the people’s fear of approaching the fiery presence of God on the mountaintop. Thus, human revelation involves a mystical connection with YHVH in which the self and God are one. Immediately after Moses reunites with the Israelites, he relates to them the contents of his revelation:
Jewish law. This emphasizes the fact that the foundation of Judaism is essentially the product of mystical experience.

There is not a single Hebrew word in the Bible that translates literally as meditation. However, contemplative practices and meditative states of consciousness are replete throughout Jewish literature. The story of Moses on Mt. Sinai is one of numerous accounts of revelation in the TaNaCh (Torah—Pentateuch, Nevi’im—prophets, Ketuvim—writings, synonymous with the Hebrew Bible) that indicate the use of contemplative practices. Both biblical and postbiblical sources suggest that meditation was central to the prophetic experience, and that the experience itself was attained in the meditative state. Furthermore, many religious scholars and practitioners assert that the entire Torah was written by people of prophetic insight, who were themselves masters of various meditative techniques. Some of these theories are based on historical evidence, and some are presumption.

The fact that Judaism has a rich contemplative tradition is a surprise to most people nowadays, including many Jews. There are numerous factors that have contributed to the virtual disappearance of Jewish mysticism. I will briefly discuss three of these reasons. First, Jewish mystical practices were always limited to relatively small groups. These meditation techniques were generally considered to be unfit for the masses and even dangerous, meant only for the most advanced Torah scholars. Thus, many of the works that dealt with Kabbalistic methods of meditation were never published, even in their original Hebrew. Second, most scholars of the Jewish enlightenment—the Haskalah—either renounced the study of Jewish mysticism altogether, or treated it in highly derogatory and tendentious ways. These European Jews wanted to portray Judaism as purely humanistic, rational, and universal, so they sought to divorce it from the mystical tradition’s “blasphemous chimeras” and “primitive inspiration.” In many ways, the Haskalah reshaped Judaism and left it empty of mysticism. Third, Eastern European Hasidic Jewry was a major source and repository of the mystical knowledge, and these communities were hit extremely hard in the Holocaust.

Since the 1970s, many Jews, especially in the United States, have regained an interest in mysticism and contemplative practices. Many of these spiritually thirsty individuals have searched outside Judaism. For instance, Jews represent approximately 30 percent of non-Asian Buddhists
Contemplative Judaism

in the United States, although Jews are only about two percent of the United States population. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as “Jubuism,” has been a fruitful path for many people. In addition, many Jews have searched within Jewish text and tradition, and this has brought about a revival and, in many ways, a reconstruction of contemplative Judaism. In this paper, I will discuss several methods and concepts in Jewish contemplative practice. They are derived from ancient and pre-modern sources, yet continue to enrich the lives of many Jews today.

Some of the most awesome and mysterious Jewish mystical practices involve the contemplation of ayin: the Jewish conception of nothingness. One cannot rationally or objectively contemplate ayin, however, for it is impossible to define and must be experienced subjectively. It is associated with another term in Jewish mysticism, ein sof, which means “no end,” or infinity. The concepts of ayin and ein sof may shed light on the nature of YHVH. Daniel Matt writes, “Since God’s being is incomprehensible and ineffable, the least offensive and most accurate description one can offer is, paradoxically, nothing.” Conceiving of the Divine as ayin challenges the temptation to anthropomorphize God or perceive God as finite. Although one can discuss God’s behaviors and attributes, “these are all descriptions about what God does and how He acts, but not what He is.”

Since YHVH is the creator and source of all things, God is no-thing, yet all things are expressions of God. The sixteenth century Kabbalist, Moses Cordovero, wrote, “God is everything that exists, though everything that exists is not God. It is present in everything, and everything comes into being from it. Nothing is devoid of its divinity. Everything is within it; it is within everything and outside of everything. There is nothing but it.” If the Jewish mystical conception of God seems to be wrought with paradox, this is not a problem, for God creates logic and therefore transcends logic. God knows no dualism, for God is not subject to dimensions of time or space. “At the deepest levels of divinity, all opposites and distinctions vanish, overwhelmed by oneness.” The size and scope of YHVH can only be called Ein Sof. YHVH can only be experienced as Ayin.

Ayin has profound implications for the Jewish concept of self. Kabbalists believe that the body is not the self, for I can speak of “my body.” The same can be said about the mind and even the soul: “I have a
mind,” “I have a soul.” Yet there remains a sense that there is an entity “I” that thinks, feels, and wills. However, it is impossible to conceive of such an “I” that is the source of my being, for that conception is a thought of “I.” Therefore, the essential self is construed as nothingness, ayin. If one rearranges the letters in the Hebrew word for “I” (Aleph-Nun-Yod), then one can form the word that denotes nothingness (Aleph-Yod-Nun). Furthermore, the eighteenth century Kabbalist, Dov Baer, the Maggid (“preacher”) of Mezritch, encouraged his followers to permute aniya (“I”) into ayin, to dissolve the separate ego into nothingness.

The experience of ayin is extremely sacred. Through realizing that the self is nothingness, one is fundamentally connected with the entire seamless universe and with YHVH. She is opened up from her narrowness. The historical exodus from Egypt is interpreted as the paradigm for this liberation of consciousness. The Israelites (Yisrael—“who struggle with YHVH”) were freed from the spiritual narrowness (metsarim) of Egypt (Mitsraim, same root as metsarim) through their connection with God, and eventually settled in Jerusalem (Yerushalaim—“the place of wholeness”). Through an experience of the self as ayin, one discovers a vastly different reality. The Maggid wrote,

Think of yourself as Ayin and forget yourself totally. Then you can transcend time, rising to the world of thought, where all is equal: life and death, ocean and dry land. Such is not the case if you are attached to the material nature of this world. If you think of yourself as something, then God cannot clothe himself in you, for God is infinite. No vessel can contain God, unless you think of yourself as Ayin.

Since YHVH is ayin, transcending all physical and temporal dimensions, the experience of God dissolves the sense of self. Thus, when Moses encounters God at the burning bush, he hides his face. Eighteenth century Kabbalist, Isaac Baer of Zlotshov, writes, “Through his experience of awe, Moses attained the hiding of his face, that is, he perceived no independent self. Everything was part of divinity.”

Many contemplative practices have been developed as ways for people to experience ayin. Some methods involve quieting the mind and withdrawing from the sensual, physical world. One seeks to attain emptiness. DovBer Pinson writes, “To reach nothingness is to achieve
a state where one’s mind is emptied of all thoughts, perceptions, and sensations, whether physical or spiritual, and in which all one feels and perceives, is nothingness.” Attachment to the self prevents one from attaining an experience of nothingness, for ayin is pre-conscious (kadmut ha-sekhel). The Maggid teaches that human will is also incompatible with ayin, which “does not desire anything.” One must leave the ego and instead follow the lead of the soul, “for the soul is something that no one comprehends.”

There are other, less abstract practices that supposedly help one experience ayin. With the conceptual method, one intellectually contemplates nothingness. One may use any question or mental exercise that leads one to conceptualize nothingness. For instance, one may contemplate the “I” that has a body, mind, and soul. One may try to imagine an existence that transcends physical and temporal dimensions. One may also meditate on paradoxes that pertain to YHVH and try to conceptualize such an entity. For instance, God is every thing, and no thing is God; and God is within every thing, and everything is within God. Such paradoxes lead one to have momentary glimpses of ayin and ein sof.

Other contemplative practices that help one experience ayin involve visualizations of nothingness. Since ayin is said to be the level at which YHVH and humans are connected, “when a person visualizes nothingness, he is, to some degree, in touch with the Divine within himself.” There is a common error in visualizing nothingness. Pinson writes, “In our attempt to visualize nothingness, we may visualize a black empty space, a complete vacuum of nothingness. However, black is itself a color and thus a definition. The color black and space are both a something by their very definition; thus, blackness, or empty space, cannot be the accurate description of nothingness.” Kaplan encourages the simple technique of trying to visualize what is behind or inside of one’s head. A more advanced and abstract method is to meditate on the letters that form one of God’s unpronounceable names: Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh (YHVH). One may literally place the letters in front of oneself. Then, one meditates on the image of Y-H-V-H until the letters dominate one’s consciousness, in a process called chakikah (literally, “engraving”). Once one has engraved Y-H-V-H in one’s awareness, one engages in the process of chatzivah.
(“hewing”) in which one visualizes the recession of the space behind the letters, the background, into nothingness, so God’s name is floating in pure ayin. One may also visualize the letters behind nothingness, so they are concealed by ayin.\textsuperscript{30}

The various ayin meditations are intended to bring about a rejuvenating, mind-expanding union with the Divine. Matt writes,

Normally, God is contracted in human thought, which thinks divine thought but in a constricted mode. The annihilation of thought, of the thinking subject, liberates the divine element that thinks within and leads it back to its source. New letters from the divine mind then flow into the human mind, where they are defined by human intellect. The immersion in nothingness does not induce a black stare; it engenders new mental life through a rhythm of annihilation and thinking.\textsuperscript{31}

The ayinization of self may cause spiritual and intellectual epiphanies. One who is immersed in nothingness gains profound insight. Thus, many Jewish thinkers believe that biblical accounts of revelation and the revelation of Torah itself involved experiences of ayin, which provided divine inspiration. The Maggid asserted that “transformation comes about only by passing through nothingness,” and his disciple, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, wrote, “When one attains the level...gazing at ayin, one’s intellect is annihilated…Afterwards, when one returns to the intellect, it is filled with emanation.”\textsuperscript{32}

Torah study is the classic type of meditation in Judaism. Neheg, the Hebrew word that is used to stress the importance of contemplating Torah, comes from the root, hagah, which means to continually ponder, review, and investigate until the knowledge becomes a part of one’s being.\textsuperscript{33} One is supposed to study Torah, not for a superficial understanding, but so the words and meanings become ingrained in one’s being. Torah study is never finished; it is an everlasting process. Thus, according to Martin Buber, even the most experienced Torah scholars “must take up Scripture as if they had never seen it, had never encountered it in school or afterwards…They must place themselves anew before the renewed book, hold back nothing of themselves, let everything happen between themselves and it, whatever may happen.”\textsuperscript{34} With this fervor and presence of mind, one engages in
hitbonenut, or intellectual meditation, on Torah.\textsuperscript{35}

Since the Torah itself is considered to be the word of YHVH as received through divine revelation, it is regarded as part of the infinite, or \textit{ein sof}.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, when one contemplates Torah, one grasps the Infinite. “There occurs the ultimate fusion and integration between finite man and the Infinite Creator.”\textsuperscript{37} The Torah is viewed as a means to experience ayin. The \textit{Maggid} advises, “I will teach you the best way to say Torah: not sensing oneself at all, only as an ear listening to how the world of speech speaks through him. One is not himself the speaker. As soon as one begins to hear his own words, he should stop.”\textsuperscript{38} Jewish contemplative tradition advocates the use of Torah for dissolving the ego and experiencing nothingness, and thus connecting with YHVH.

First-person observance of the meditative mind and body has led to the development of many contemplative techniques for Torah study. Torah scholars have noticed that the more relaxed their mind and body are, the greater the capacity for creative thought. Furthermore, a state of relaxation causes a higher alertness in one’s mental state, and epiphanies are more likely to occur under such conditions.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, many Chassidic masters encourage students of Torah to pause in silence during intense contemplation. Some even advise students to sing songs and use melody as a meditative technique to relax the rational mind and therefore become more intuitive.\textsuperscript{40}

Mantra meditation is yet another technique used for Torah study. One chooses a passage from Torah and repeats it over and over again silently or aloud in order to draw deep meaning from it. This method was popular among sixteenth century Kabbalists in Safed. Rabbi Cordovero wrote about how he and his companions regularly went out into the fields with the sainted master, Shlomo Alkabatz, and engaged in \textit{gerushin}, which literally means “exile” or “divorcing.” This method seems to have involved a type of mantra meditation with verses from Torah in order to gain new, profound insights.\textsuperscript{41} No matter which technique one uses, meditation is considered an indispensable tool for unlocking the mysteries of Torah, for tapping into the \textit{ein sof} of possible meanings.

Prayer is perhaps the most common form of Jewish contemplative practice. There are three daily services in Judaism: the morning service, known as \textit{shacharit}; the afternoon service, known as \textit{mincha}; and the evening
service, known as maariv. On Sabbath and festivals, there is a fourth service added in the morning after the Torah is read, called musaf. The Hebrew word for prayer, tefilah, literally means to connect and join. Prayer is regarded as a way for people to connect with the Infinite. Intention plays a critical role in tefilah. The Hebrew word for intention and mindfulness is kavanah. Without kavanah, prayers are compared to a body without a soul, and it is said that they do not even exist. Thus, in any recitation or spontaneous outburst of tefilah, one is supposed to be in an altered state of awareness.

Each prayer service is designed to be a meditative experience. Let us examine the shacharit service as an example. It is composed of four parts that correspond with four general worlds, or fields of consciousnesses, as described in Kabbalah. The lowest world is asiyah—actualization or completion. This is the realm of action, the physical world bound by space and time, as we know it. A higher, more refined universe is yitzirah—formation. This is the world of feelings and emotions. A higher universe is the world of beriah—creation, a mental-intellectual world where reality begins to emerge, yet existence is without shape or form. It is a world of transcendence and potentiality. The highest of the worlds is atzilut—emanation or nearness. This world is so close to its source that it has no self-perceived existence on its own. It is an extension of its Source.

The four parts of Shacharit also correspond with the four levels of one’s soul. The lowest level is nefesh—soul, which is manifested in human action. A higher level is ruach—spirit, which gives rise to feelings and emotions. The third level is neshama—breath, which is associated with the power of intellect and cognitive consciousness. The highest level of soul is chayah—living essence, which is a transcendent consciousness.

The shacharit service begins with Birchat Hashachar—morning blessings and recitation of offerings. These prayers stimulate the nefesh level of soul in the realm of asiyah. One offers thanks to the Creator for providing all the physical necessities, for giving strength to the weary, for dressing the naked, and so on. This section of shacharit serves as a warm-up, and is meant to ground one in her body and in the world.

The second part of the morning service is Pisukei D’zimrah—verses of praise. These prayers are meant to stimulate emotions and feelings, to arouse the ruach in the world of yitzirah. One praises YHVH for the
miracles and wonders performed throughout time. One stands and is permitted to sway and rock. At this point in the service, one becomes ready to engage in a major peak of the service.

The third section of shacharit is Keriat Shema—blessings and reading of the Shema. The word shema means “hear” or “listen” and it is the most ancient and important prayer in Judaism. The prayer’s literal meaning is: “Listen, Israel, YHVH our God, YHVH is One.” The first word of the prayer shows that this is a time for meditation. This is an opportunity to internalize the waves of emotion and energy from the previous section of the service, to be still and to listen with utmost kavanah. During the recitation of the Shema, one sits down and closes one’s eyes. Kaplan encourages one to dwell on each word of the Shema for fifteen to twenty seconds. This way, one may draw insight from each bit of the prayer. For example, one might notice that the first word, sh-m-a, represents a contemplative path to nothingness: the first letter, shin, is the sound of white noise, chaos; the second letter, mem, is the opposite sound, one of perfect harmonics; and the third letter, ayin, is silent and denotes nothingness. This type of meditation is related to hitbonenut (intellectual), and thus corresponds with the beriah level of consciousness and stimulates the neshama.

The fourth stage of the morning service is the Shemoneh Esrei—eighteen benedictions, also known as the Amidah, which literally means “that which involves standing.” These are the last and profoundest of prayers. One stands with feet together and, during Kabbalists encourage one to stand completely still. This posture symbolizes the elimination of self-expression and the abandonment of one’s self as a separate, independent existence. One enters the world of atzilut, the world of oneness, with the soul-level of chayah. The Shemoneh Esrei blessings should be recited with eyes closed, and very slowly. The original saints took an hour to say the 500 words of the Amidah. The fact that Jews are encouraged to engage in such prayer services three to four times per day reflects the extent to which Judaism is meant to be a contemplative way of life.

Judaism encourages people to engage in contemplation at every moment. The Ve’Ahavta, the prayer recited immediately after the Shema, commands Jews to “love Hashem, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources…while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise.”

Contemplative Judaism
addition to the few practices we have discussed—ayin, Torah study, and prayer meditations—Jews may heed the call of the Ve’Ahavta through observance of halakha, Jewish law. The Torah’s 248 positive 365 negative mitzvot (“commandments”) provide more than ample opportunity to lead a mindful life. Furthermore, there are specific brachot (“blessings”) one may recite to sanctify virtually any event, such as waking up, smelling a flower, washing hands, eating, urinating, hearing thunder, and encountering a river, beautiful person, strange-looking person, mountain, rainbow, spring bloom, outstanding scholar, and friend who has just recovered from a serious illness. On a more mystical level, every speck of space and matter in the universe is regarded as ayin and thus saturated with YHVH. The awareness of this divine energy underlying all material existence increases the flow from its source (ayin) to its manifestation (yesh). Thus, through gazing at an object, through meditating on a thing that is, one brings blessing to it.\(^{51}\) The world can be transformed.

I do not wish to imply that all Jews, or even most Jews, lead exceptionally contemplative lives. That is a personal matter that should be left to each individual. However, the wisdom and resources for such a lifestyle are plentiful in Judaism’s four millennia of existence.

Notes

7. Kaplan x.
15. Kaplan 89.
22. Pinson 53.
27. Kaplan 88.
28. Pinson 54.
29. Kaplan 85.
35. Pinson 97.
ZIGGURAT

36. Pinson 97.
37. Pinson 97.
39. Pinson 103.
40. Pinson 103.
41. Kaplan 56; Pinson 103-104.
42. Pinson 107.
43. Kaplan 99.
44. Pinson 109.
45. Kaplan 122.
46. Kaplan 128.
47. Kaplan 129.
48. Pinson 112.
49. Pinson 113.
50. Kaplan 105.
51. Matt, Ayin, 90.
PAKALUK
A Meta-Socratic Dialogue

Andrew Marantz

Pakaluk: Why have you come at this hour, Andrew? Isn’t it early?

Andrew: It is indeed.

Pakaluk: About what time?

Andrew: Just before dawn.

Pakaluk: Before dawn? Jesus Christ, I’ve slept in my office again!

Andrew: It seems so.

Pakaluk: My pet pig must be starving! But—how did you get into the building?

Andrew: Why, I shimmied up the drainpipe. Reginster leaves his windows unlocked; everyone knows that.

Pakaluk: I—I don’t know what to say. Have you just arrived?

Andrew: Goodness, no. I’ve been here for hours. I deliberately kept from waking you because you looked so peaceful. Like a little cherub.

Pakaluk: Um…this is…strange. I don’t know what to say.
ZIGGURAT

Andrew: Say nothing. To no one. Ever.

Pakaluk: Fine, I suppose… But Andrew, why have you come so early?

Andrew: Why, to talk about Socrates, of course.

Pakaluk: OK…and this couldn’t wait?

Andrew: In the tireless pursuit of Truth, there is not a moment to spare.

Pakaluk: I suppose that’s true, in theory.

Andrew: You have given us some very compelling paper topics about Socrates.

Pakaluk: Yes, and I instructed you to answer them on your own, in writing.

Andrew: This is so; however, I should prefer it if we explored one of these prompts together. For while I am in your service (in the sense that all students serve their teachers), we are both, in the last analysis, mere servants to Truth, are we not? Thus while it would be stimulating to answer this question for you, it will be doubly elucidating, I hope, to discuss the subject with you, that we may inform each other along the way.

Pakaluk: This…this whole thing makes me a bit uneasy, but I suppose you have a point. May I at least go use the restroom, perhaps get a cup of coffee—

Andrew: Are you dedicated to a life of philosophy, or is this merely a hobby to you?

Pakaluk: I’m not sure what you—

Andrew: If you but dabble in wisdom, then please, take as much time as you’d like. But if we are both serious about our task, then we already
agreed that we have no time to lose. Or do you not recall this?

Pakaluk: I—yes, I recall it. Very well. Which prompt interested you?

Andrew: Number five was my favorite. The one that asked about Socrates’ religious views, as expressed in the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*.¹

Pakaluk: “Are Socrates’ religious beliefs in tension with, or even incompatible with, his commitment to reasoned inquiry?” Is this the question you mean?

Andrew: Yes. Or, to put it a different way: these are the questions I mean.

Pakaluk: Plural? How so?

Andrew: Your question, as I see it, is really three. As written, the prompt rests on two assumptions. It presupposes that Socrates had both “religious beliefs” and a “commitment to reasoned inquiry,” and then asks about the relationship between them. The assumptions do not pose a large problem, as I am confident we will eventually agree (after some clarification, of course) that they are justified.

Pakaluk: If my question rests on assumptions we both take to be correct, where is the harm in that?

Andrew: You have done no harm. You are a gentle man, Pakaluk. A gentle, gentle man.

Pakaluk: Don’t touch me.

Andrew: Very well. Your question is not fallacious. But I propose that our task will be easier if, instead of making suppositions, we ask outright: first, what do we know about Socrates’ religious beliefs? Second, how should we characterize Socrates’ philosophical project? After we dispense with these, we will be prepared to tackle the question of whether, or how, his religiosity interfered with his project as a whole.
Pakaluk: And what do you think we will find? Please state your thesis clearly.

Andrew: If you insist. I think we will end up agreeing that Socrates held some beliefs that we will want to consider religious, or at least extrarational. But—if I may predict how this open-ended mutual inquiry will proceed—our characterization of Socrates’ project will be more nuanced than the traditional “commitment to reasoned inquiry” one might expect. That is, while Socrates indubitably possessed a brilliant critical mind, his ultimate aim was more prescriptive than descriptive, more a call to action than a critical exegesis. Kept in these terms, it will become clear that his religious beliefs rarely, if ever, impede his philosophical project. He was able to be hortatory, critical, self-consistent, open-minded, and “religious” (in some sense), all at the same time. Moreover, we will find (though this won’t become clear until the very end) that any hortatory thinker must necessarily rest on some first principles, which principles will necessarily lie beyond the grasp of the thinker’s own “critical inquiry.” Whether these first principles should be considered “religious,” in our conversation or more universally, is a contentious question. At least, if I had to guess what we will discover together, that’s what I would guess.

Pakaluk: Good. Now that I have an idea of where we’re going, please begin. The sooner you start, the closer I am to getting a bagel afterward.

Andrew: Then I ask you: did Socrates hold religious beliefs?

Pakaluk: Of course he held at least some. Would anyone deny this?

Andrew: Let’s begin at the beginning: a religious belief must be in accordance with, or a constituent part of, a religion. Is this so?

Pakaluk: To be sure.

Andrew: Then from whence did Socrates derive his religious doctrines? To which religion would he have belonged? In ancient Greece there was
only one accepted religion—or none, as some would argue.

Pakaluk: What does this matter? The beliefs themselves were inherently religious.

Andrew: What do you mean by this?

Pakaluk: Come now, Andrew, we both know what religion is.

Andrew: On the contrary, my dear Pakaluk, religion is the slipperiest of concepts. As a Religious Studies concentrator, I have attended several seminars that have attempted to reach a satisfactory definition, and none has come close.

Pakaluk: I am not interested in splitting semantic hairs. Religious, superhuman, spiritual—call it what you will. But the fact remains that, at least in the Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, Socrates makes repeated reference to gods, daimons, and oracles. By what definition are these phenomena not religious?

Andrew: I see your point. Yet these three dialogues have something else in common, something more basic: they are all apologetic devices. Is it not widely agreed that Plato wrote these with a mind toward exonerating Socrates on charges of impiety?

Pakaluk: It is.

Andrew: Then we should be surprised only if we did not find this characterization of Socrates paying homage to the state religion.

Pakaluk: Admittedly, we can never know how much the Socratic dialogues represent the man himself—but if we are not going to at least consider the face value of the text, we might as well leave now. In fact, that sounds like a great idea—

Andrew: Granted, we should look to the texts as they are. And when we
do look, with Plato’s apologetic agenda in mind, Socrates’ religious fervor seems almost feeble, does it not? Plato keeps Socrates from looking like an out-and-out atheist, but he does not paint him as the most pious man in the agora. Socrates accepts basic theism, but he hardly embraces it. In the Euthyphro, Socrates never introduces a religious idea himself—he merely grants or challenges those put forth by Euthyphro. To take one example, Socrates asks (at 6b), “Do you believe that there really is war among the gods?” He asks for clarification on this point not to fortify his theological knowledge, nor because he cares one way or the other; he asks because it catches his opponent in a contradiction.

Pakaluk: Yes, in the Euthyphro Socrates was primarily concerned with debunking his opponent’s notions about piety, and the gods were merely his means. But what about the beginning of the Crito, when Socrates uses a dream-vision as “evidence” for a prediction (44b)? Crito does not mention dream prophecy; Socrates brings it up unprovoked.

Andrew: Do you mean to say that dream divination is inherently religious?

Pakaluk: It has been refuted by science.

Andrew: There was no brain imaging technology two thousand years ago, or one hundred years ago. People worked with what they had.

Pakaluk: Which was superstitious hogwash.

Andrew: Was Freud irrational, then? Was he religious? By our analytic standards his science looks soft, but he considered his work a triumph over superstition and ignorance.

Pakaluk: None of this is getting us any closer to nailing down the simple fact that Socrates held at least some religious convictions. Take the Apology, where Socrates is the primary speaker; no one invokes the gods but he himself, and he does so repeatedly.
Andrew: He was defending himself on charges that included atheism—it is no wonder he broached the topic!

Pakaluk: You must admit he does more than mention the gods; he swears by them. The last sentence of his defense is, “I turn it over to you and to the god to judge me…” (35d).

Andrew: Yet he never comes out and says, “I believe.” He wriggles out of the charge that he denies the gods by pointing out that this charge contradicts the other charge against him, that he acknowledges daimonic activities (27). How much simpler would it have been to say what he believes, instead of refuting the charges strictly by their own lights!

Pakaluk: He may not set out his beliefs clearly and directly, but his religiosity is certainly implied here.

Andrew: Or maybe all these invocations of gods and daimons are not professions of belief but mere figures of speech.

Pakaluk: Figures of speech? Why would he speak of “the god” judging him unless he believed it to be true?

Andrew: Why do I say “God bless you” when my friend sneezes? Why did you take Jesus’ name in vain earlier when you were startled to find yourself asleep at your desk? Was it to express a deep Christian conviction?

Pakaluk: Don’t be fresh with me.

Andrew: We are all products of our times. Socrates’ acceptance of some form of polytheism fulfilled a social obligation, not a philosophical one.

Pakaluk: Let’s talk about daimons, then, since you brought them up. Belief in daimons was beyond the call of duty; Socrates could have placated the polytheist plutocrats without mentioning daimons at all. Yet he seems proud of his own personal “daimonic sign” that flares up when he is
“about to do something that [isn’t] right” (40a-b). Do you take this to be meaningless, arbitrary language as well?

Andrew: George Orwell once said, “Writing a book is a long, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon one can neither resist nor understand.”

Pakaluk: All right, all right. Orwell might not be talking about an actual demon, but he is figuratively expressing something, some conviction he held about writing.

Andrew: And Socrates, too, had an intuitive sense of right and wrong, for which he used the convenient analogy of daimonic activity.

Pakaluk: Right. An intuitive sense that trumps reason. The feeling tells him what to do, and he later uses reason to justify his decision.

Andrew: I can’t disagree with this entirely.

Pakaluk: Oh, you can’t?

Andrew: No. I would take issue with branding Socrates’ penchant for daimons as religious, which is why I brought it up. But it does sound plausible to me that it was extra-rational in a broader sense.

Pakaluk: I won’t try to establish the daimon analogy as “religious,” because it appears you are determined to belabor this point. But if his intuition takes precedence over his reason, is this not a problem for him as a philosopher?

Andrew: Well, this brings us nicely to our second question—that of what Socrates was up to. Some conceive of him (and our other philosophic forbears) as bracingly critical, tirelessly tearing down any illogic in their students and opponents.
Pakaluk: Do you not think this was Socrates’ intent?

Andrew: If it was, he seems to have failed.

Pakaluk: So Socrates was either not a philosopher, or a failed one. I don’t like those odds.

Andrew: Not to initiate the definition game again, but I think it would be useful to ask what philosophy is—and was. To start, I would suggest that we resist the urge to conflate modern (especially analytic) philosophy with the philosophy that was practiced by the Greeks who invented the field (and the word). In philosophy departments today, making any unsupportable or illogical claim is anathema.

Pakaluk: Should this not be the case?

Andrew: I withhold judgment on that; I am making a factual claim. In contemporary philosophy, irrationality is repugnant intrinsically; it is always undesirable to hold something irrational; there is no need to ask why.

Pakaluk: And you mean to imply that Socrates would not be bothered by logical errors.

Andrew: In a vacuum? Probably not.

Pakaluk: “Vacuum”? I don’t grasp your meaning.

Andrew: Do you prefer “armchair”? The point is this. Philosophy in Athens was more than an intellectual exercise: it was inexorably concerned with how life should be lived. To the Greeks, the question “Why should I not hold something irrational?” would not be ridiculous on its face. In fact, they would offer an answer: “Because it might cause you to make the wrong decisions.”

Pakaluk: But Socrates spends much effort pointing out other people’s
muddy reasoning.

Andrew: Yes, in order to change their behavior. He tries to convince Euthyphro not to prosecute his (Euthyphro’s) father. He tries to convince Crito that it is wrong to escape from jail. It is no accident that the Socratic dialogues are concerned with human virtues, as opposed to cosmology, or logic games, or geometry: these pursuits are abstract, whereas virtues apply directly to how humans live. Don’t you remember, in lecture, classifying Plato’s early dialogues as “protreptic”?

Pakaluk: I can’t deny that Socrates was primarily interested in the life of wisdom. After all, Socrates is famous for the dictum, *The unexamined life is not worth living*. If he had said, instead, *The unexamined theorem is not worth holding*, he would not have been nearly so inspiring. Indeed, he would not have been Socrates.

Andrew: I couldn’t have put it better myself. So he was free to let his armchair logic slide so long as his hortatory project was strong. Broadly speaking, it should come as no surprise that Socrates held unexamined principles. His goal was to convince interlocutors to act in ways he considered “good”; it only makes sense that, contrary to his own claims, he did enter discussions with a pre-formed idea of what the “good” is.

Pakaluk: But a pre-ordained conclusion is a black mark against one’s reasonability.

Andrew: If total open-mindedness, or the ability to be swayed on any point, is the be all and end all of reasonability. If, on the other hand, there is something to be said for sticking to one’s intuitive guns and being protreptic, then Socrates’ subjection of reason to pre-fabricated ethics, under certain circumstances, would not be a “black mark” at all.

Pakaluk: I do see that Socrates’ project was protreptic, but this should not allow him to dispense with critical thinking altogether.
Andrew: Certainly not. He did not play fast and loose with the truth, and he had a cunning critical mind.

Pakaluk: Which is why it is so hard for me to reconcile his hard-edged skepticism with his weakness for religious platitudes!

Andrew: There you go harping on that concept of “religion” again, when we have already agreed neither of us knows what it means.

Pakaluk: Andrew, you exhaust me. Socrates was religious, in the fullest sense: he believed in gods, for which he had no rational proof.

Andrew: As we have already agreed, the evidence that Socrates was a “believer” is sketchy at best.

Pakaluk: Fine. But the mere fact that Socrates mentions gods in an accepting light is, I think, enough to shift the burden of proof onto you if you wish to show me he was an atheist.

Andrew: You may be right about that. If I had to guess, I would not think of Socrates as an atheist.

Pakaluk: Then he was religious?

Andrew: I don’t purport to teach you what Socrates believed. You are the teacher, after all. But, as I read the dialogues, it seems to me that Socrates didn’t care much about gods one way or the other.

Pakaluk: Come again?

Andrew: Whenever possible he skirts theology, preferring to discuss life of the soul (on earth, in the public sphere). He speaks of the gods only when his interlocutors bring them up, and then he uses god-talk as a shared point of cultural reference—just as he uses Greek myths to illustrate his
points in the *Euthyphro* (91d).

Pakaluk: But the question of the existence of God, or of some divine force, is one of the richest in all of philosophy. You mean to say Socrates never thought of it? You make him out to be an apathetic dolt!

Andrew: Apathy is not necessarily a sign of stupidity. It can also imply narrowness of purpose.

Pakaluk: I cannot think of any other great philosopher who simply had nothing to say on the subject.

Andrew: I can. In fact, he was one of Socrates’ contemporaries.

Pakaluk: Surely you don’t mean Anaxagoras. Or Plato himself? Why, they—

Andrew: I mean Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha.

Pakaluk: Oh. Well—oh. Isn’t he a religious figure?

Andrew: By what definition of religion?

Pakaluk: Oy, gevalt! Forget it.

Andrew: On my reading, at least, whatever Socrates’ personal convictions were about gods or daimons, he did not hold them dear.

Pakaluk: I don’t see what difference that makes. If he held a tenuous belief, he held it.

Andrew: Yes, but we are not concerned with the truth value of theism itself, but with its effects on Socrates’ wider project. His religious stance, if he has one, is not in danger of upsetting his critical mind with regard to other matters. He cares more about the thorough pursuit of ethical truth.
than about any other matter, religious or otherwise: there is no danger of
his saying, “Justice is so-and-so because Apollo told me so.”

Pakaluk: Oh, but he does. Do you not recall, in the *Apology*, Socrates’
account of his life’s work?

Andrew: Yes, an edict from the oracle and all that.

Pakaluk: Is this not religious? Is this apathy?

Andrew: Again, I would hesitate to call it religious—superstitious might
be more like it. But in either case, let us also remember what Socrates does
after hearing the “word of god,” as it were: he attempts to falsify it.

Pakaluk: As a way of proving it right!

Andrew: Yes, by his (apologetic) account, he had faith that the oracle would
turn out to have some deep meaning. But I would not compare this faith
to that of a Pentacostalist, or of Abraham at the alter. Rather, I would call
it a kind of practical trust—similar to, for example, a scientist’s faith that
the universe is governed by universal laws.

Pakaluk: “A scientist’s faith”? Listen to yourself!

Andrew: All our systems of belief rest on axioms. In some ways, the
scientific method is a prime example of this. Without agreeing on certain
deep, unquestioned tenets, scientists could not communicate; in fact, they
could not do anything that anyone would recognize as “science.”

Pakaluk: And what, exactly, does a scientist believe that allows her to do
science?

Andrew: The list is too long to name, but I have already mentioned
universality. This will serve as an example. The scientist must believe that
a law of physics discovered in her lab—assuming it is replicable, falsifiable
but not yet falsified, etc.—will also apply in Detroit, or Denmark, or the middle of the sun. If the law is not universal, it is worthless.

Pakaluk: Can you really call this faith?

Andrew: Of course. The scientist has no way of proving that laws of physics apply universally; she doesn’t even have evidence for this belief. She may never have thought about it before.

Pakaluk: So she holds this belief because others hold it, and because it allows her to keep doing work within the system she finds herself in. I see nothing wrong with that.

Andrew: Nor do I. Nor did Socrates. Everyone he knew took for granted that oracles had something important to teach them, and so he accepted this belief—which acceptance allowed him to continue his work. If Socrates had read the oracle’s prediction with the simple faith of a Pentacostalist, he would have accepted it at face value: “I am the wisest man in the world,” and that’s it. On the other hand, if he had rejected it as pure superstition (as you or I might have done), he would never have embarked on his empirical study into relative wisdom in Greek society.

Pakaluk: So he accepted Apollo’s creed, but left it open to interpretation.

Andrew: Right. To be frank, though, my dear Pakaluk, Socrates’ acceptance of revelation does trouble me. Revealed truth can, in principle, supercede all rational channels and implant itself directly into a system of belief.

Pakaluk: I agree. Once Socrates accepts revelation, there is no guarantee that his entire philosophical program will not be derailed by it. What if he one day received divine word that, “Contrary to what you once thought, Socrates, piety is just what the gods love.”

Andrew: We are in agreement here: that could have happened, in principle. Socrates may have dropped all his reasoned commitments in the face of
revealed truth. But it is also possible that he would have chosen to reject the revelation in favor of rational or experiential knowledge. As we saw with the Delphic oracle story, he was no fundamentalist when it came to revelation.

Pakaluk: Let’s not forget that he did accept the oracle’s word.

Andrew: Yes, but not uncritically; and it is entirely possible that, had his empirical study gone differently, he would have been forced to conclude that the oracle was wrong. Or, to take another case: what if the oracle’s message had been flatly contrary to reason?

Pakaluk: You mean some sort of riddle or paradox?

Andrew: Well, a cryptic paradox can always be manipulated to reveal some deeper truth. “No man of woman born,” and so on. I mean something that, no matter how you slice it, just doesn’t gel with reason.

Pakaluk: Oh, so what if the oracle had told him that he would fall to his death in a hole shaped like a square circle?

Andrew: Exactly.

Pakaluk: Then he would be forced to choose reason over revelation.

Andrew: Precisely my point.

Pakaluk: But wouldn’t we all? Kant says we wouldn’t even be able to think outside certain fundamental ways of knowing, like categories and numbers.

Andrew: Kant also considered himself a Christian.

Pakaluk: So?
Andrew: So his Christian beliefs (or feelings) lay outside those basic strictures. If $1=3$ is not contrary to logic, I don’t know what is.

Pakaluk: Yet Kant was able to sequester his extra-logical beliefs when it came to other philosophical discussions.

Andrew: As was Socrates. In fact, I would argue Socrates was in better shape than Kant—or Spinoza, or Descartes, or Berkeley—because his gods (again, assuming he believed in them) were fallible, and sometimes even downright wicked. For Leibniz, or Averroes, the Voice of God would have been absolute. If Socrates heard the voice of Apollo, however, there was always the chance Apollo was just drunk.

Pakaluk: May I recap? I am still trying to get your argument straight.

Andrew: I make no arguments, sir; I want only to uncover what you already know.

Pakaluk: Oh, come off it. You mean to suggest that Socrates was not always rational—that he occasionally privileged prior beliefs over thorough skepticism.

Andrew: I do. I think these prior commitments of his were more likely to be epistemic, or ethical, than “religious” (whatever that means), but I think it is accurate to say that there was a limit to how far Socrates wanted his “critical inquiry” to go.

Pakaluk: Yet Socrates is held up as the father of critical thought, a model of rational man.

Andrew: And well he should be.

Pakaluk: But here you are, trying to prove that Socrates was irrational!

Andrew: My only labor, dear Pakaluk, is to help you clarify—
Pakaluk: I told you to stop that. Is Socrates rational or not? Out with it.

Andrew: Socrates was not infallibly rational. His reason did not extend to the ends of the earth. His worldview was rooted in certain axiomatic beliefs.

Pakaluk: And yet he is a paragon of critical thought?

Andrew: We all have first principles that we shelter from critical reasoning. Socrates was remarkable for the amount of time he spent deconstructing his own biases; we cannot blame him for not getting around to all of them. In fact, if he had, he would have undermined his project.

Pakaluk: You mean his dedication to protreptic philosophy?

Andrew: Correct. Any system of belief that wants to do work in the real world must rest on well-established first principles, and the system of Socratic ethics is not exception. I think we talked about this earlier.

Pakaluk: We did. So there could, in theory, be systems of thought that do not compromise their rationality at all?

Andrew: Perhaps, though that is a discussion for another time. For instance, the pre-Socratic Skeptics may have avoided logical inconsistency altogether by never taking a firm position on anything. Yet it is clear that deep skepticism of this sort, even if one finds it coherent, cannot be hortatory.

Pakaluk: I can see that.

Andrew: If Socrates had subjected every shred of knowledge, his or anyone else’s, to critical inquiry, he may have engaged in some ethereal intellectual debates, but he never would have convinced the young men of Athens to attend to their souls.²
Pakaluk: And then, as you said earlier, he would not have been Socrates.

Andrew: Precisely.

Pakaluk: It seems you have a good grasp on this material, Andrew. You may want to reign in your focus a bit; with so many tangents and such broad scope, your argument may be more amusing and rambling than it is succinct and focused. Still, I admire your ambition, and I think you raise a lot of points that deserve further inquiry. Based on what I have heard so far, I think I will enjoy reading your paper.

Andrew: Why, thank you. I sincerely—

Pakaluk: Now please leave my office.

Notes


2. This dialogue seems to ignore the “Socratic paradox,” assuming instead that Socrates did have knowledge and was coy about it.
learning things
  like plums;
  when to eat them
  to get the best flavor
  even if they don’t look so fine

like strawberries;
that look better than they taste
and usually cause some horrific reaction
a perfect ideal, in that regard.

I wonder
  is truth
  or Truth
  or this carefully peeled,
rarely unflawed,
ever-quite-ripe banana?

the scholars
  wander the orchards of Eden
  pluck truth, beauty, and art from the branches
  scatter a cautionary pesticide of happiness in front
  (petals ominously placed before newlyweds)
(and when most of us are worried about
  things that spoil your food
  rather than
  things that spoil your mood)--

the cynics
  float airily above
  scorning fruit and the essential vitamins

the dreamers
  curl around an essence of something
  --a scrap of rind, a seed, a taste
  offal of Eve and God’s son.
  poor wretches; they gather trembling with hunger
  around the last bit of it left--
  and they are too chickenshit to eat it.
  their bony, membranous wings
  twitch and marrow-shiver in the weak light.

learning plums
  and refrigerators;
  with the secrets of molding food
  and the possible corruption of milk
  and even—the horror!
    solid, fine-looking papayas
    rotten to their black-seeded core
    mangoes, dripping rancid juice
    and an orange,
    a vivid, bright, circumspect orange
    left to the unholliness of flies.
call me a crisp tart
but to those of us grounded
with our peaches or nectarines in half-land
it is enough to take the damn apple for what it is
and bite
chew
swallow.
we have nothing else to eat.
In the American popular imagination, visions of the apocalypse have become almost inextricably tied to the Christian eschatology. However, to constrain apocalyptic ideation to one particular religious group, or even the broader category of groups that consider themselves expressly “religious,” is to ignore a large segment of eschatological thought. Leftist political groups, particularly those of communist and anarchist persuasion, have developed apocalyptic visions of their own. While these groups hold visions distinct from those of the Judeo-Christian model, they exhibit characteristics that clearly parallel those of religious apocalyptic groups.

One such group is Weatherman (also known as the Weathermen and later the Weather Underground Organization), a radical communist cadre born out of tumult of late 1960s America. While not self-consciously religious, Weatherman constituted an apocalyptic group and represented an extreme manifestation of the turbulent social climate of the era. Its efforts to instigate revolution, while violent, never had the strength to challenge the US government and capitalist structures, and likely hindered the causes they professed to support.

Weatherman formed as a faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), one of the most prominent organizations of the 1960s American New Left. As the Vietnam War continued despite massive efforts on the part of activists, fissures erupted within SDS concerning the questions of protest and resistance. Members were frustrated that their peaceful efforts had yielded little or no effect, and many were ready to support more militant action. These issues came to a head at the SDS’ national convention in 1969. Issuing a statement entitled “You Don’t
Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows” (an allusion to Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues”), a group of students spearheaded by the prominent Columbia University SDS chapter called for a renunciation of pacifism and the adoption of aggressive action to instigate a full-scale communist revolution. The split caused by this statement essentially dissolved SDS, and the statement’s supporters came to be known as Weatherman.¹

Weatherman established a handful of collectives across the country dedicated to militant action against capitalism and imperialism. In an effort to hasten an apocalyptic anti-capitalist revolution, the largely middle class student group unsuccessfully attempted to organize working class white youth and engaged in a campaign of street rioting (most famously the Days of Rage in Chicago in October 1969). After Weatherman’s leaders decided to shift strategies to focus on an extended bombing campaign and three of its members died in a bombmaking accident, Weatherman’s already small ranks of several hundred further winnowed. A core cadre of 20-30 went into hiding and continued bombings throughout the 1970s under the new name of the Weather Underground Organization.²

The Weathermen held views of an eventual and inevitable utopia that are most accurately described as apocalyptic. In this sense, the self-described “revolutionary organization of communist women and men” was clearly of the revolutionary tradition of Karl Marx, as opposed to the incremental and peaceful transition socialism advocated by moderates.³ Marx believed that the material condition of the proletarian majority would continue to deteriorate until circumstances became so unbearable that workers would rise up in a violent, worldwide revolution. After this inevitable revolt, humanity would finally attain permanent harmony and equality. This was to be the end of history. Marx never provided details about the operation and structure his millennial utopia, a reticence shared with most religious apocalypticists.⁴ Likewise, Weatherman never clarified the results of its hypothesized apocalypse. Its goals were highly generalized, as can be seen in the objectives described in its founding statement: “The goal is the destruction of US imperialism and the achievement of a classless world: world communism.”⁵

To help solidify the apocalyptic vision, Weatherman created a strong in-group/out-group dynamic amongst its members. In the years before its
You Don’t Need a Weatherman

core members fully dropped out of mainstream society (and changed the organization’s name to the Weather Underground), the Weathermen lived in small collectives in a handful of major American cities. The lifestyle in these collectives was militaristic and the living conditions austere. Weathermen were seldom permitted to visit with friends and family outside of the collectives, and all requests to do so had to receive the permission of the exalted leaders on the “Weatherbureau.” The collectives also tore apart couples within its ranks as part of its mission to “Smash Monogamy.” Group sex and casual encounters were common practice. The theory behind these actions was to make all members of a collective equally intimate with one another without any relationships privileged above others, but in practice this frequently turned into sexist exploitation, with the most attractive women being carted between collectives to have sex with the largely male leadership.

While the Weathermen forged intimate bonds within the group, outsiders were viewed with outright hostility. Weatherwoman Phoebe Hirsch described the mentality in frank terms: “Either you take this stand with us, or ‘fuck you.’ It was their problem, it was never our problem.” Weatherbureau member Mark Rudd echoed this sentiment:

At that point in our thinking, there were no innocent Americans, at least not among the white ones. They all played some part in the atrocities of Vietnam, if only the passive roles of ignorance, acquiescence, and acceptance of privilege. All guilty. All Americans were legitimate targets for attack … I was overwhelmed by hate. I cherished my hate as a badge of moral superiority.

This pattern of thinking mirrors that of more traditionally religious apocalyptic groups. Polarized thinking—that those who disagreed with them were at the very least complicit to atrocities—allowed the Weathermen to feel justified in pursuing violent action in the name of revolution. Such would be just punishments for the wicked.

Weatherman used several means to enforce conformity within its ranks. The most noted is the use of criticism-self-criticism (CSC) sessions. In these sessions adapted from Maoist theory, a collective would ruthlessly assault the perceived political and personal flaws of an individual member for as long as twelve hours at a time. Member Nais Raulet called CSC a “vicious tool to disgrace people into accepting collective discipline.”
“Gut check” was a similar tactic employed to shame members into participating in dangerous political action. When an action entailed the possibility of arrest or injury, as many of Weatherman’s actions did, reluctant members were subjected to a barrage of accusations of cowardice and complicity. In this highly effective tactic, members would be berated with indictments like, “If you don’t do it … you’re a racist because the Vietnamese are getting bombed like crazy all the time … And you’re worried about getting arrested?!”11 Both CSC and “gut check” served to crush any internal dissent within Weatherman and coerce members into accepting the group’s ideology.

While the Weathermen never asserted that their apocalyptic vision was derived from any sort of divine revelation, they treated militant action as an agent thereof. Weatherman encouraged revelation through action rather than abstract theorizing. According to their ideology, reality reveals itself through moments of conflict. While not a Weatherman himself, one-time SDS President Todd Gitlin succinctly articulated the primacy of the militant activism that the group celebrated, writing, “Each round [of conflicts with the state] was an approximation of the apocalypse, in the original meaning: the revelation of things the way they actually stand.”12

For the Weathermen, dramatic and violent showdowns with the police showed state repression, and therefore the essence of modern capitalist society, at its most tangible. Thus, riots such as the “Days of Rage”—where several hundred Weathermen fought the police and destroyed property in the upscale Gold Coast neighborhood of Chicago—were imbued with a kind of spiritual significance.13

Though far outside of mainstream society, Weatherman served as an extremist reaction to the frustration and relative powerlessness of America’s leftist youth. Weatherman’s existence served as an outlet for a segment of this demographic to transfer its dissatisfaction with the current order into a vision for a perfect communist future. As part of a revolutionary cadre, the Weathermen felt a part of a grander historical narrative at a period when they would otherwise be forced to confront political impotence.

After the initial successes of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, US progressive movements stalled. Activists made little headway in advancing racial and economic equality, and, more significantly for Weatherman, the Vietnam War continued to escalate. Young people...
died by the thousands. And despite having exhausted all peaceful and bureaucratic means, these young people had little if any influence over their own fates. Disillusionment and bitterness were widespread, creating fertile soil for apocalypticism. The lack of agency felt by young people was less extreme than, but not unlike that of by the Jews during the Persian occupation of the 6th century BCE and the Roman occupation 1st centuries BCE and CE, periods when apocalypticism also flourished. For its members, Weatherman served as a means of tangibly channeling these emotions, albeit in a destructive and counterproductive manner.

Weatherman’s effects on society ended up being quite different than those they intended. While its attempts to hasten a revolutionary apocalypse employed violent means, the genuine danger Weatherman posed to the social order was minimal. Never numbering more than a few hundred, at no point did the Weathermen approach a capability to truly challenge the US government, let alone capitalism as a whole. Their effort to organize working class white youth into a guerilla faction to fight alongside the Black Panthers was also an unmitigated failure.

In 1970, the group planned to bomb a military officers’ ball at Ft. Dix, but an error while making the bomb killed three Weathermen instead. Deeply shaken by the deaths, the group decided to henceforth only engage in property damage and took extensive measures to ensure that all targets would be evacuated before explosions occurred. Thus, while the group did structural damage to sites like the Pentagon and the Capitol, no lives were taken and society was never put in any significant jeopardy. However, had there not been an accident in preparation for the Ft. Dix attack, many would have been killed and it is possible that the Weathermen would have continued a murderous campaign. So while they never could truly challenge society’s greater structures, Weatherman at one time had the intention and capability to kill individuals and instigate fear in groups they opposed.

Weatherman’s virulent militancy likely did more harm than good for the leftist causes that it supported. Their violent actions led the Weathermen to be condemned even by many groups on the radical left, not to mention the nearly universal scorn from moderates and conservatives. Weatherman also served the political purposes of its most prominent adversary, President Richard Nixon. The profoundly unpopular tactics of
the group allowed Nixon and his conservative allies to portray the larger anti-war movement as being constituted primarily by violent subversives. In his appeals to the “silent majority” of pro-war Americans, Nixon implicitly played on public disapproval of Weatherman’s tactics, helping the Vietnam War to continue for longer than it would have otherwise.  

Weatherman therefore occupied the undesirable position of being too weak to effectively attack social structures but visible enough to frighten mainstream America into hating it.

In its single-minded pursuit of an apocalyptic communist revolution, Weatherman served as an outlet for disenfranchised youth and inadvertently worked against its stated goals. Though not religious in any traditional sense, the organization adapted and revised old models of apocalypticism to fit its own secular worldview, helping to shape the leftist eschatology that exists in fringe groups to this day.

Notes

8. Varon 93.
11. Varon 92.
12. Varon 94.

15. Varon 55.
PROVING WHAT WE SEE
WITH THE EYES OF LOVE
A Demonstration on the Existence of God

Nathan Schneider

One must admit that theology, of all writing, certainly causes the greatest pleasure.

Jean-Luc Marion

The Dialectical Proof for the Existence of God

A Short Demonstration

By “demonstration” I mean what it sounds like: a performance meant to show something. I have in mind a picture of the *homo religiosus*: at the most a piece of universal anthropology, at the least a particular theological agenda. These things are hard to phrase, particularly in such a way that they will communicate beyond the choir. To do this I will work with something familiar, or if not that at least old and beautiful. I will call it a proof because that is what this sort of thing has been called before. But whether anything is actually being proven is probably more a question for the eyes of love.

This essay on the existence of God is phrased as a variation on Anselm of Canterbury’s famous Ontological Proof for the existence of God. The reason for doing so is partly but not entirely aesthetic. Thinkers from Descartes to Karl Barth to Kurt Gödel to Iris Murdoch have found inspiration in the movements of Anselm’s proof. I come to it for many of the reasons they do, for its unique elegance and strange interface between the realms of thought, being, and spiritual faith. But I also come to it simply because they do. My demonstration depends on the way that we
ZIGGURAT

hear people before us and around us talking about God, so in its very form I try to take this attitude of attentiveness to heart.

It takes the format of an encounter between people, or communities, or people and experience. This whole idea is very simple, but as an exercise and performance it is still worth putting in the most rigorous terms possible. Otherwise you might not think it is actually a proof.

The Dialectical Proof

Premise 1. There are those who believe in God.

Lemma 1a. Presumably the belief in Premise 1 suggests that such people understand God in such a way that God effectively exists, in one way or another; which is to say, God has some effect on the person’s “personal universe.”

Premise 2. The better one understands the belief, presumably the better equipped one is to converse (on a variety of human levels) with the believer. (This is a general rule though, as only a justified presumption, it need not be true in every case.)

Lemma 2a. It is possible to understand a lot about how the believer understands God, but one understands God differently if one (unlike the believer) does not understand this God as effectively existing. This particular question might even be of special importance to the believer.

Premise 3. One wants to converse with the believer, to understand what the believer means in talking about God, whether about God in particular (implications for one’s sense of perfection) or other things which in the believer’s mind are connected to God.

Conclusion 1. In terms of that dialectic (between one and the believer, in which the believer largely, though not entirely, might dictate the terms), one’s failure to believe in God’s existence is phrased as a failure to understand what the believer understands.

Conclusion 2. In terms of the dialectic, when one understands what the
believer understands to the satisfaction of the dialectic, one believes in God.

Conclusion 3. In terms of the dialectic, God exists.

Perhaps this appears at first to be a very weak, pedestrian attempt. We expect more from a proof for the existence of God! Compared to what others have tried to conclusively show it shows very little. That is to say, in empirical terms. As an account of experience, this way of phrasing the existence of God is a more accurate description than the theologians’ proofs usually are. Hearing from others is the primary, obvious way that people learn the religious facts that they put to use in their lives. Even so, the proof for the existence of God has usually been thought of as separate from it. But the theologian Karl Barth, in his discussion of Anselm, argued vigorously for the key role of faith in Anselm’s method, a faith informed first of all by hearing the Word of God in the light of the Holy Spirit. With a little translation into the language of everyday happenings, that is pretty much what I argue is primary too. The proof is called “dialectical” because it has to do with conversation and interaction between people and experiences.

(A note on the name of God. In logical induction, to prove that there exists at least one of some kind of thing, one needs only to prove that one thing of that kind exists. For the argument to be applied, for instance, to the Christian God or some mechanics of reincarnation, the easiest derivation is probably to simply replace the name God with whatever you would like ((within the set of all beliefs)). Similarly “the believer” can be interchanged with all kinds of people or experience ((within the set of all relevant interlocutors))). The rest of this essay is more or less an impressionistic commentary on these lines.

Anselm’s Ontology

The argument first put forth by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century suggests that the very idea of God implies the necessity that God’s being is real. Anselm was an Italian monk at a monastery in Normandy when he wrote the Proslogion, the work in which his famous proof appears. After this and other works spread fame ahead of him, he went on to
become the archbishop of Canterbury in England.

Anselm’s initial statement of the proof takes only a few pages. He develops it further in a reply to the critique by his contemporary, a monk named Guanilo, but the main substance is contained in the *Proslogion*. First, he names God the height of perfection, “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” This idea of God, he goes on to observe, can exist as an idea in the human mind. Now to even consider an entity that is so perfect requires, by the rules of reason, that this entity exists, and that its existence is necessary. If we try imagining an entity that is perfect but does not exist, or whose existence is contingent rather than necessary, we reach a contradiction, because it is easy to imagine an entity more perfect than that, simply by imagining one that is necessary and exists. As a result, the perfect being that we imagine absolutely must exist.

While struggling to develop his argument, as Anselm explains in the preface to the *Proslogion*, he sought a proof that would demonstrate both the nature of God and God’s existence. Only the God whose nature is the height of all perfection can satisfy this demand for existence! It is in this respect that the dialectical account of God begins both to follow the pattern of the Ontological Argument and to diverge. In both proofs, to truly understand the attributes of God (in a way that is dialectically satisfying), which must certainly include existence, is to think of God as existing. But Anselm drew from a Platonic emphasis on the truth of ideas above the truth of the sensible world, which reenforced for him the validity of a proof that depends on a static concept of perfection. Framed in the subjectivist emphasis of more recent thought, the dialectical proof assumes that perfection depends on the person conceiving of it. Existence of such spiritual perfection is a consequence of the person’s conception. God’s existence can thereby be established as real to us, since glimpsing it molds our subjective perceptions and experience. Whether these two statements, mine and Anselm’s, are equivalent is not easy to determine.

Modern philosophers, from Descartes and Kant to Kurt Gödel, have transplanted Anselm’s argument to the ground of empirical reality that science has claim over. They have used it in attempts to phrase (or disprove) the reality of God’s existence in the same sentence as the existence of a ribosome or a chair. Karl Barth, reading Anselm in light of his dictum in chapter 1 of the Proslogion that “I believe so that I
may understand,” insisted that to do so is a misappropriation. The whole sequence, according to Barth, should be rather more circular. Belief in the reality of God necessarily precedes and instructs the whole logic of the proof. In the end, it does serve as a valid proof, but the substance of faith still pervades its reasoning. Unlike the introspective address of Descartes in his version of it, Anselm phrases his proof as a prayer to God, whose existence therefore permeates its very form. As we construct a dialectical proof, it is worth being attentive to Barth’s insight. Desire for God (which Barth places alongside the preceding belief) or for the mother or the friend in this dialectic precedes understanding. One already welcomes God before understanding God because one has welcomed the believer or the experience. God’s existence has a real effect from there on out. Through this relationship, as through the ideal concepts of Anselm’s proof, God’s existence becomes realized in substance.

Meanings and Ends of Religious Proofs

By now it should be evident that my demonstration is not exactly a proof in any normal sense. It does not prove a fact beyond doubt or really even attempt to. Properly, the dialectical proof is much more a descriptive account of belief in God the way, in all reality, the other proofs are as well.

Most analytic philosophers today agree that the traditional proofs for the existence of God—whether derived from causal chains or the observable natural world or pure reasoning—are not ultimately reliable. Still, many maintain the reasonableness of religious faith, even if not on the grounds of a ironclad proof about God’s being. It is true, few claim to have come to religious belief because of such a proof. Steven Cahn suggests that the reasons people believe in God are not addressed by such proofs, which usually say nothing about rules for living or the expectations of worship. (C.S. Lewis’s argument for God on the grounds of moral law, which many people have found personally convincing, is an exception.) Instead, Cahn contends, religious belief normally rests on “self-validating experience” on the part of the believer or the shared traditions of a moral community. Resting the experience of God in the “unknown,” Kierkegaard considered the proof an impossible task, for
even if I began I would never finish, and would in addition have to live constantly in suspense, lest something so terrible should suddenly happen that my bit of proof would be demolished.

To him, the one who seeks the proof is a pitiable soul concerned with the wrong questions.

**Aesthetics of Reasoning**

Anselm, however, describes the experience of finding the proof as a struggle followed by an effulgent relief that he hurried to share with others.

So it was that one day when I was quite worn out with resisting its importunacy, there came to me, in the very conflict of my thoughts, what I had despaired of finding, so that I eagerly grasped the notion which in my distraction I had been rejecting.

Judging, then, what had given me such joy to discover would afford pleasure, if it were written down, to anyone who might read it, I have written … from the point of view of one trying to raise his mind to contemplate God and seeking to understand what he believes.

Barth, unlike many other readers of Anselm, points to the importance of this joy (even while subjugating it below *intellegere*, “understanding”) in his taxonomy of Anselm’s theology. It is the answer to desire. I can relate a little to Anselm’s joy when I remember the time, almost four years ago, when the dialectical proof came to me (strangely, in the form of a proof) after a meeting about Islamic theology with my teacher, as I walked out the door of the department building into the sun. For people, I think time has shown, proofs about God are not so much effective as they are satisfying, or better, nourishing. They weave together knowledge and the aesthetics of reasoning we have been taught. These are the particular strategies of logic and rhetoric that seem sensible to people of a certain age or disposition. They come mainly from the patterns our teachers teach us. Changes in these patterns explains the peculiarity today of Anselm’s Platonism, relying
so affectionately on his abstract concepts against observable reality.

Those were the mechanisms that shed light for him. Nowadays people are using very different languages for trying to prove the existence of God, whether to themselves or others. They often begin by imitating science. Even while there are those who claim that these proofs have been effective for them, and though I am willing to accept a role as medium that the proofs may have played, I tend toward Cahn’s emphasis for the foundations of religious belief, with a touch of Barth: emotional experience and community, informed by the words one has heard said, which for some may have included design theory.

**The Doctrine of Satisfaction**

Any dialectic or Platonic flight of reason operates under the hanging question of satisfaction. This is what makes aesthetics of reasoning significant—they are defined by what appears satisfying to the participants. It is true for science as much as any other realm of thinking, for theological speculation and proofs alike. We are satisfied with an explanatory narrative when its terms fit our needs. The explanations of Newtonian physics fit the needs of someone with a bouncing ball but fall somewhat short in high-speed relativistic conditions. The proof for God from the interlocking complexity and variety of life was satisfying for many until Darwinian mechanics offered more productive explanations. In his notes *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein explores the dynamics between satisfaction, proof, and experience.

If e.g. someone says “I don’t know if there’s a hand here” he might be told “Look closer”.—This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game. Is one of its essential features.

The imperative to “look closer” is the answer to dissatisfaction as well as a summary of the scientific method. I would add to that “see the bigger picture,” since the two are counterpart shifts in the scale of interpretation. Their presence also alerts us to the eventual instability of the things we now find satisfying, since looking closer or broadening one’s view may someday undermine the explanations we have gotten used to.

When we take the criteria of satisfaction to be transitory, experience
asserts itself as the constant, for what we experience directs these changes. Wittgenstein’s discussion points toward the dialectical “language-game” as the arbiter of satisfaction in the encounter with experience. He makes a rather chaotic picture of proof and coherence, with narrow, uncertain lines between apparent reasonableness and madness. However tenuously, he clings to the bits of knowledge that appear to be affirmed both in individual experience and the community’s language-game, like the existence of his hand and certain facts about the moon. These are the things any sane person must believe, though he never finds a thorough proof for them.

Proof as Genre

The whole idea of the proof about God signifies a decision in itself, a way of approaching the question that has sometime, somehow been posed. A decision to take up a question. There is of course no need for proof to do many of the things people do about God, from becoming atheists to praying. Axioms apparently lie below our logics whether we choose to investigate them or not, and if so, they inform whatever approach we take in doing the investigation. The proofs for God have been named and categorized in such a way that segregates them in their own realm for the specialists—behind names like Ontological, Cosmological, and Teleological (now dialectical too)—certainly not without reason, since it was under segregated circumstances that they were devised. It is in reference to this that I name my proof with an aloof philosophical term. Our proofs are performances that can be pointed to by those who have no interest in the content beyond their result and the fact of their existence, saying, See, this thing has been proven.

Thus the proofs and provers of God are a kind of insular club, wrapped in special mystique, all of which I take on in phrasing an idea as a proof for the existence of God. I do so in order to suggest some bridge of continuity, particularly for the tendency in us now to relegate the proofs to the dustbin, utterly unable to understand what they might have been trying to accomplish. That is, the creation of God in the understanding, or the creation of understanding in God. In the language-game that satisfies him Anselm’s proof does what I want to do in what satisfies me: show that “whatever we believe about the Divine Being” cannot be understood
Dialectical Method

The dialectical proof fits into a broader method for thinking about theological questions, which is to say, communicating about the spiritual. It rests mainly on social, psychological, and linguistic logics, but should do whatever is possible to interface other areas of scientific, traditionally theological, and artistic thinking that might be productive as well. “Productive,” of course, can be defined as one likes. (Personally I am interested in work that develops freer, more compassionate understanding between peoples and a clearer sense of the human condition.)

Community and Pedagogy

Since the work of Emile Durkheim at the beginning of the twentieth century, locating conversations about religion in terms of human societies has proven productive and satisfying. To him, all religion has its source in groupings of people: “the idea of society is the soul of religion.” A large part of his work’s appeal, I suspect, is its affinity with both traditional theology and scientific research. The power of the community he describes in no small way can inform traditional concepts like the church as body of Christ or the people of Israel or the Muslim ummah. Research in sociobiology continues to demonstrate, moreover, the evolutionary necessity of certain kinds of group behavior that what we call religion may be an outgrowth of. A dialectical method is definitely post-Durkheimian, recognizing with him both that “the unanimous feeling of believers down the ages cannot be mere illusion” and that among the most useful ways to talk about this feeling should be to recognize ourselves as members of a community taking part in a conversation.

“Pedagogy” should serve as a vital term because it describes, on a smaller level, the relationships that the community consists in. People teach one another and suggest things to one another. The content of the conversation is shared and passed down to children. Different hierarchical and nonhierarchical models of pedagogy are manifested in different kinds of communities. Even when a community decides to push toward one extreme or another, both terms should be retained in order that the
conversation can be attentive to nonhierarchical dialectical commerce in authoritarian societies as well as hidden hierarchies in apparent states of anarchy.

Alvin Plantinga’s *God and Other Minds* suggests in the form of proofs a connection between the reasonableness of believing in God and the practice of believing in the existence of other people around us. It may help inform the mechanics of pedagogy. The hermeneutic philosophers, like Gadamer and Habermas also offer important tools for taking account of the dialectical process.

A passionate reading of Durkheim can and should remind: be attentive to the power of each other and the love that is or could be between us! The proof for the existence of God is very much wound up in that.

*Authority and Change*

Slovoj Zizek reminds us of Hegel’s three “modes of religion”: (1) the religion of the people, expressed in their life and customs, needing “no special reflexive act of faith,” (2) positive religion, to be accepted as it is imposed by authority, and (3) the “religion of Reason,” a critical endeavor of the Enlightenment project. In the dialectical method there is no great distinction between these. All are products of whatever arrangements of pedagogy and authority surround them. (3) is a subset of (1) (which happens to be elevated by Hegel’s personal sympathy). (1) and (2) reflect different arrangements of pedagogy—consequences of political habits. Modern religion in the United States, for instance, with its variety of dogmatic forms combined with traditional and legal freedom of conscience, demonstrates the porosity of the categories. God is proved by pedagogy and community whichever way you cut it. Nevertheless, the felt difference on the ground for people can be very great. The location of authority is one of the great variables of dialectical method. It affects what people are used to choosing about their beliefs.

In any one context, a number of authority models may be viable. As I am not the first to observe, a kind of evolutionary process occurs among religious movements. Those that appeal to people in a particular circumstance survive and those that do not do not survive. This sort of thinking plays an important role in a dialectical method. There is an extent to which we can try to mold the forms we take on, but only to a very
limited extent. Just like in ecological evolution, there are so many variables always at work that they cannot all be taken account of. One’s actions will likely have unintended consequences. Thomas Jefferson believed that ensuring freedom of conscience in the United States would bring about the end of dogmatic religion, but in the modern world, these constitutional protections have proven actually to strengthen it. A dialectical method exposes the helplessness of people to control their own beliefs, which in turn, contributes meaning to the dialectic proof for the existence and spiritual necessity of God.

Theology describes the difficult process of weeding through it all, figuring out what it really is we aspire to as living things.

**Ethnographic Theology**

On the ground, what does a dialectical method look like? It depends on what a person is trying to do. For a theologian who is trying to develop truer pictures of the love of God, Ada María Isasi-Díaz might be a good example. She was born in Cuba, exiled in the United States early on in life, and trained in Catholic theology. Dr. Isasi-Díaz calls the work that she does *mujerista* theology—*teología* from the lived experience and aspirations of Latin American women. It is meant to work for their liberation, and consequently, hers. Because Latin American women are so vastly underrepresented in theological literature, she has to go to the source. She begins by participating in and observing Hispanic church communities. She holds retreats and focus groups with Latinas to bring out the data of their experience. Then in her academic writing and teaching she works to distill all of this into a communicable text, in large part to challenge theological understandings, church teachings, and religious practices that oppress Latina women, that are not life-giving, and, therefore, cannot be theologically correct.

She recognizes the existence and importance of the communities around her, and the value with sharing with them as well, but knows well that the proofs she finds are only authoritative in a limited sense:

- it is not a theology exclusively for Latinas but a theology *from* the
perspective of Latinas … that should be taken into consideration by all liberation theologies.

Throughout she depends on reflection on her own experience, Catholic tradition, and the Word of God.

Every theology is an ethnographic theology, since it emerges from the revelation of experience and the aspirations of the particular community that created it. Each proves the existence of its God by perfection. Some have been more commonly heard than others. They have had their picture of God broadcasted. Often they do so not out of malevolence but because the dialectical process is not apparent to them. When we notice the limitedness of our own dialectic and see outside to that of others, we realize that the situation is shared and we approach the sharing differently.

God in Other Minds

Diversity of beliefs among peoples is more apparent and pressing now than ever before. It is a theological problem. Christian theology, with competing traditions of universalism and tribalism, is especially troubled by the appearance and proof of God in the minds of others.

The dialectic discovery that there is God in other minds is an incredibly significant one. It leads, better than anything, to the sensibleness that God has reality outside of minds at all.

Disagreement

A lot of different kinds of theologies exist and they each form a particular dialectic. Some, like Vedanta and Baha’i, collect all the theologies together that they can and make of all of it a more complete theology, though dialectically, that is probably not really what they are doing. Working in the dialectical method, again and again one is forced to recognize the common condition of dialectics we all inhabit. Maybe this will lead to a proof for a larger God who is easier to share, but not necessarily so.

The fact that we disagree is an expected thing in the dialectic method. There are sociobiological reasons why people take belief to divisive
extremes, and we have little choice but to live with what creation has
given us. There are times that we will need to agree with the neighbors
and there are times we will need to disagree in order to ensure the
group’s survival. Our behavior and beliefs will accordingly mirror these.
A dialectically responsible theology should be attentive to the ways in
which God changes behavior toward our borders. It must be willing to
find a place for everything from ardent fundamentalism to the most vapid
liberalism, otherwise it would be neither honest, correct, or complete. But
with these forces respected, it must take seriously its job as theology, its
duty to the perfection that we believe must transcend them.

**Limits and Necessity of Pedagogy**

Iris Murdoch warns against the dialectic approach (even to Anselm
specifically!) for the deadening it might do to the vitality of religion.

In the quest for the meaning of the Ontological Proof the *Lebensformen*,
or “language-game,” contextual argument is, in my view, a wrong
turning. It ushers in the “soft” idea, already at large in both theology
and ethics, that there is something called “religious language” which is
“expressive” not “descriptive.” … Religion is thereby put in a corner,
as one possible mode of proceeding.

But I find that she is unnecessarily suspicious of it. A “contextual
argument” taken to its actual conclusion comes to the opposite of what
she suggests. Religion as such is the whole corner that we inhabit, or one
inescapable wall or floor or ceiling of it, none other than the one possible
mode of proceeding. Dialectical religion is the way of saying, “I am in this
corner, yet I know that there are others.” What she calls expressive may be
more or less what I call “spiritual.” But in that special case, because of the
quality of perfection and its effect on us, the expressive *is* descriptive. This
language-game, if we will call it that, proves its own absolute necessity and
there is nothing “soft” about it. The language-game is absolute. A saint
who has never heard of God cannot be a saint.

Pedagogy is our access to and refusal of each other, binding limits
even as it makes relation possible. The dialectic is a description of this
condition. Within it we draw our conclusions from what we have been taught by everything.

**How Far Our Proofs Take Us**

Anselm wrote that, after his proof, only a fool could not believe in God. Yet his first critic, Guanilo, responded “in behalf of the fool.” They both refer to Psalm 14, which sings, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” The fool is everywhere in the world, all around us, and it is astonishing the way the fool behaves and believes.

There are other things that compel us to satisfaction in proofs. These are theologically pertinent, like the need for community, the love for each other, and our devotion to our teachers. These and other forces, both somewhat understood and utterly chaotic in combination, sum up roughly back into Spirit, which is how Barth explains the mystery of belief. It helps to have both languages at hand, venturing toward merging them into one.

A proof takes us as far as we can go, the fullness of what we can take on in this world as truth. That is no thing to be stood back from. There is nothing to do but the best we know how. The madness of other minds, their distance and our need for them, reminds us (if we have heard the good news to begin with) that living truth is faith, and no less foolish, as is all love.

**Apology for Tourism**

For my own part, I prefer to abandon tribalism and learn the God of anyone I encounter.

**Bibliography**


CONTRIBUTORS

Shira Danan is a senior majoring in Religion at Columbia University. A Texas native, she moved to New York as quickly as possible, and now seeks employment in the world of television or religious studies. Or just the world in general would be fine.

During his time at Brown, Andrew Marantz ’06.5 has learned many things, including: how to write literary essays, how to perform exegesis, how to play Blockus, how to imagine a hypercube moving through 3-D space, how to cook tempeh, and how to dance while sober. He will graduate in December, at which point he will probably hit you up for a job.

Mariya Masyukova is a student in Brown University’s Class of 2009.

Zindzi McCormick is in her second year at Brown. She plans to concentrate in architectural studies and economics.

Travis Mushett is a freelance philosopher from Snellville, Georgia. He is a junior at Dartmouth College where he majors in religion and writes for the progressive Dartmouth Free Press. He plans to attend divinity school after graduation.

Sonia Saraiya ’08 is an intellectual dilettante who has briefly alighted on International Relations as her chosen concentration. Sonia also writes and edits for other campus publications, including post- and the Brown Daily Herald. Sonia enjoys copy-editing, chocolate, conversations about ideas and writing in the third person.
Nathan Schneider graduated from Brown in 2006, where he was one of Ziggurat’s founding editors. Now he studies religion in Santa Barbara, California and maintains a weblog about theology at http://rowboat.smallsclone.com.

Sam Berrin Shonkoff of Berkeley, California is a senior religious studies concentrator at Brown. He is founder and co-leader of Kavanah, Brown’s Jewish meditation group.

Jessica Taylor ‘07.5 is concentrating in Visual Art and History of Art & Architecture. Her interests include maps, cupcakes, and the sea.
Ziggurat is currently offering subscriptions for either one or two years. We publish in the Fall and Spring each year, and issues will be mailed promptly upon publication. To subscribe, please fill out this form completely and mail it to the address below with payment enclosed. If you so wish, additional contributions are also welcome and appreciated.

At present, we can only accept cash (U.S. $) and checks. Checks should be made out to “Brown University” with “Ziggurat” in the memo line.

☐ One year ( $ 15 )
☐ Two years ( $ 25 )

Name ___________________________________
Address (1) ___________________________________
(2) ___________________________________
City & Zip ___________________________________
Email ___________________________________

Ziggurat
Brown University
Box 1930
Providence, RI 02912