

EVANGELIZING A MODERN AGNOSTIC CULTURE

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One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then stretch out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me.” (John 20:24-31)

In recent years, there has been an effort by biblical scholars such as John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Bishop Robert Barron, Andrew Newberg, and Eugene D’Aquili to provide interpretations of scripture that would appeal to modern highly educated, scientifically minded agnostic people in our secular culture who live on the fringe of our religious traditions. This is a rather unique evangelistic strategy. The problem with such an approach according to Cardinal John Henry Newman is that in order to be evangelized, people need to believe in something that cannot be apprehended by the senses or understood by reason.

(Apologia 1865-Chapter 5)

That's a problem for modern agnostics. This article examines the evangelizing efforts of Crossan, Borg, Barron, Newberg and D'Aquili in their attempt to deal with this problem.

Borg and Crossan begin by focusing on the epistles attributed to St. Paul and the text of Acts. They point out that Paul's epistles to the churches he established make up over one-fourth of the New Testament, that he is considered the greatest missionary in Church history and that without him there would not be Christianity as we know it. Therefore to address the agnostic's doubt, evangelization must begin with Paul.

First, in trying to make Paul appeal to modern agnostics Borg and Crossan emphasize that Paul was transformed from a radical egalitarian champion of democracy and freedom for all, including slaves, women and the poor, to a conservative defender of the status quo by others writing or editing in his name.¹ Clearly this is an appeal to the liberal political sentiments of modern agnostics:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
There is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus:
(Galatians 3:28)

But then:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. (Ephesians 6:5-8)

Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. (Romans 13:1)

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man, she must be quiet. (Timothy 2:12)

Second, they point out that the problem with the biblical account of Paul's trip to Damascus was that he could not have been empowered with authority from a high priest in Judea to go to Damascus to arrest dissident Jewish followers of Jesus, and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment, because a Jewish high priest in Judea could never exercise authority across Roman provincial borders, especially as far away as Damascus.² More likely, they imply, Paul went to Damascus, his old stomping grounds where he was educated, to ally himself with his former Jewish

colleagues, the members of the Damascus synagogue where he received his Pharisaic education, in order to develop a strategy for punishing members of the Jewish Jesus sect. This alternative explanation appeals to the modern agnostic's concern about scripture's legal and historical inaccuracy and provides a more credible explanation.

Third, and more compelling, Crossan and Borg suggest that when Paul became involved with the Jesus sect in Damascus, his hostility to them began to dissipate as he was emotionally drawn into their ecstatic faith in Jesus' resurrection, and their comradery and love for one another. It was in this state of emotional and religious ecstasy that he experienced his famous vision of Jesus in the city of Damascus.³ Why is this alternative interpretation more compelling to modern agnostics? Agnostics have always been skeptical about the Biblical versions of Paul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. (Acts 9:4-5, 22:6-21, 26:26) For scientifically minded modern agnostics, Crossan and Borg's version of Paul's religious conversion has a certain plausible resonance.

There is considerable scientific evidence from neurology that our brains are wired such that in intense emotional and ecstatic states, we can and do experience visions especially of people who are important to us. These are not the hallucinations experienced by those in psychotic states or in states of extreme anxiety. Such hallucinations are primarily auditory and due to abnormal neural pathways in diseases such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Consider Season 2, Episode 22 of the popular television series "The West Wing" entitled "Two Cathedrals" and Season 3 Episode 1 & 2. The President of the United States, Josiah Bartlet, is deciding whether to run for a second term in the midst of a deluge of unfavorable publicity. He is sitting alone in his office in an intense state of grief over the unexpected and sudden death in a car accident of his long time personal assistant whom he has known since he was a teenager when she was his high school teacher. He has just returned from her funeral. Suddenly she appears to him in a vision and tells him, if he doesn't run because he is afraid to lose, she doesn't want to know him. He decides to run.

Many liberal agnostic viewers, including the writer of the series, Allan Sorkin who by his own admission is not religious,⁴ have taken these episodes to heart, identified with the characters and accepted President Bartlet's vision of his dead personal assistant. Perhaps they have

pondered why our brains are wired for such visions, wondered what purpose they serve and who is responsible for the wiring. Perhaps some have dared to think it could be God.

Bishop Robert Barron is known throughout the world for his series *World on Fire Catholic Ministries*. His capacity to dialogue with atheists, agnostics, Christians, Muslims, Jews, believers, and non-believers is legion. His unique style of evangelism doesn't stray too far from Catholic dogma, yet at the same time provides alternative interpretations of scripture and new ways of contemplating God.

Consider this sympathetic definition of modern agnosticism which Fr. Barron includes in his *Words on Fire Study Program Workbook, The Mystery of God: Who God is and Why He Matters*:

In addition to the two phenomena of religion and anti-religion, a further basic orientation is found in the growing world of agnosticism, people to whom the gift of faith has not been given, but who are nevertheless on the lookout for truth, searching for God. Such people do not simply assert: "There is no God." They suffer from his absence and yet are inwardly making their way towards him, inasmuch as they seek truth and goodness.

Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the Meeting for Peace in Assisi," October 27, 2011

Aside from God's existence, modern agnostics have two doubts about God's nature. First, they are skeptical of the anthropomorphic depiction of God in scripture and elsewhere, and second, they question the notion of a personal God who looks after us. With the advent of Quantum Physics, some agnostics have pondered the existence of a non-material reality to which Quantum Physics points, and wondered if God exists in in this reality. Perhaps they hope that in some distant future, science will find out.

In his workbook, *The Mystery of God: Who God is and Why He Matters*, Fr. Barron takes these issues head on. "While different creatures are ordered to different ends, and thus have different essences, what they have in common is that none of them has to exist. There could be a world without fish, or birds, or stars, or even people. But God is different. God is the being whose *essence is existence*. God is not one being in the universe, or even a being who exists outside of the universe in a special

realm. Instead God just is ‘existence,’ or in the words of Pope St. John Paul, ‘the great Existent.’”⁵ Barron goes on to emphasize that God is not a being in the universe (or outside the universe) that can be discovered through scientific investigation because he is Being itself. While this rather unique definition, which doesn’t stray too far from Catholic Dogma, may appeal to modern agnostics and allow them to accept God’s existence on those terms, believers will wonder how Fr. Barron concludes that the creator of the universe is a personal God who is concerned with us, a conclusion that is very important to them. Here, Fr. Barron relies on Pope John Paul II and the Catechism of The Catholic Church:

On October 22, 1996, John Paul II speaking to the members of the Pontifical Academy of Science in plenary assembly stated, “I would remind you that the spiritual soul is created directly by God. Our spiritual soul refers to our intellect and free will. It does not come about from evolutionary processes as does our body and cannot be explained by neurophysiological processes. Scripture suggests metaphorically that God Breathed life into man (Genesis 2:7) and that is why we have God like attributes like intellect, free will and rationality.”

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, “The soul, the seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, is irreducible to the merely material, and can have its origin only in God.”⁶ Thus to the extent that our soul is linked to eternity which is non material and is shared with God, so it is that God of necessity takes a personal interest in us and loves us, a view that Thomas Nagel, a contemporary agnostic philosopher says we should give serious consideration.⁷

Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili using state of the art SPECT⁸ scans and radioactive tracer isotopes that lock on to brain cells, examined the brains of meditating Buddhists and Franciscan nuns at prayer. They discovered that intensely focused spiritual contemplation alters the circuitry of the brain so that a person perceives transcendent religious experiences as occurring outside the self. Newberg and D’Aquili conclude that the sensation that Buddhists call “oneness with the universe” and the Franciscans call the presence of God is not a hallucination or a delusion or but a chain of neurological events that can be observed, recorded and photographed.⁹ It would appear that indeed God is hard-wired into the human brain. Is religion then simply a product of biology? Newberg and D’Aquili have demonstrated the neurophysiological concomitants of the

human experience of God. However, they are unable to explain the essence of a soul that is mysteriously linked to a God whose ultimate essence is beyond human comprehension. Despite the unique evangelistic efforts of Crossan, Borg Barron, Newberg, and D'Aquili, the problem that Cardinal Newman identified persists: in order to be evangelized people need to believe in something that cannot be apprehended by the senses or understood by reason. Science and reason can take us pretty far but, ultimately, like Peter, we have to get out of the boat.

Notes

1. Borg, Marcus and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Vision* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), pp 1-2.
2. Borg and Crossan, op. cit., pp. 70-1
3. Crossan, John Dominic, *What really Happened to Paul on the Road to Damascus*, Huff Post, 3/21/2012/Updated 12/6/2017
4. Haught, Nancy, *Religion, Politics Mix in 'West Wing*, 'Orlando Sentinel, March 24, 2001.
5. Barron, Fr. Robert E. and Trent Horn, *The Mystery of God: Who God is and Why He Matters* (Skokie, IL: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2015), pp. 7-8.
6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), p. 20.
7. Nagel, Thomas, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3-12.
8. Single photon emission computed tomography.
9. Newberg, Andrew, and Eugene D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2001), pp. 1-10.