

Is Modern Paganism True?

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I. INTRODUCTION

I agree with so much in Steven Smith’s splendid new book¹ that it seems ungenerous to focus, as I shall, on the principal disagreement between us. But the disagreement is an important one. It goes to the heart of the question Smith raises in the final pages of his book: which has more “religious truth,” Christianity or modern paganism?² Before I examine our theological differences, it is important to note a few of the political, legal, and constitutional points on which Smith and I agree. In practical terms these are surely more important than the theological subtleties that distinguish his understanding of God from mine. So far as worldly matters are concerned, Smith and I are comrades-in-arms and I hope he will accept me as his pagan ally.

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1. STEVEN SMITH, *PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS IN THE CITY: CULTURE WARS FROM THE TIBER TO THE POTOMAC* (2018).

2. *See id.* at 344–45.

First, Smith is right to describe our ongoing culture wars as a *religious* “contest” between two parties that are both driven by ideas of sacrality and ultimate meaning and, hence, as a conflict that cannot be reduced to one of mere interests alone, as we normally understand that term.³ Something more important is at stake. Smith is correct to say that those who defend what he calls the “Christian (or better perhaps, Abrahamic) position” in this contest are opposed on the other side not just, or most intently, by secularists who scoff at religion but by a not-yet-well-defined party whose zeal cannot be understood or explained except in religious terms, even though its advocates do not describe their values in the explicitly theological vocabulary their adversaries often employ.⁴ It is only when we view the conflict in this light that its magnitude and implications become visible. Because its roots lie in our deepest yearnings and most abiding convictions, we shall not be done with it anytime soon. To suggest, as Mark Tushnet does, that “[t]he culture wars are over,” and that the losing side should now retire in defeat, can most generously be characterized as a childish observation.⁵ Smith’s view is more realistic and mature.

Second, I agree with Smith that in the crucial area of religious liberty and expression, the establishment and free exercise clauses have been hijacked for partisan purposes.⁶ Instead of standing above the theological quarrel that lies at the heart of our ongoing culture wars, these constitutional rights have been made instruments for the advancement—sometimes aggressive, sometimes not—of a program of reforms. These reforms are inspired by an ideal of personal and social life that itself is conditioned by a set of values which in their defenders’ eyes are sacred, transcendent, independent of all material conditions and beyond the power of time to corrupt. Like Smith, I regret the partisan capture of the Constitution by those on one side in these wars and favor the restoration of the religion clauses to a position of greater neutrality.⁷ I am appalled—Smith is too kind to use the word—by the zealotry of those who today press what he calls the pagan cause.⁸ I believe that same sex couples have a constitutionally protected right to marry, but I am on the side of the evangelical baker who wishes not to be forcibly drafted into their union. Only the kind of puritanical fervor

3. *Id.* at 16.

4. *Id.* at 136–38, 255.

5. *Id.* at 344 (emphasis omitted) (quoting Mark Tushnet, *Abandoning Defensive Crouch Liberal Constitutionalism*, BALKINIZATION (May 6, 2016), <https://balkin.blogspot.com/2016/05/abandoning-defensive-crouch-liberal.html> [<https://perma.cc/ED74-XDLD>]).

6. *See id.* at 304–07 (discussing both effects of the establishment clause and free exercise clause on religious accommodations).

7. *See SMITH*, *supra* note 1, at 267.

8. *See id.* at 197–98 (describing the persistence of paganism in Western culture today). I think it is a mischaracterization to call their cause pagan; more on this in a moment.

that religion alone arouses can explain why those who are refused this baker's services find it so disturbing to think that, in the baker's eyes, their constitutionally protected marriage is a sin.

Third, I am not a bit upset by the continuing public presence of all the vaguely deist symbols that have helped to shape our sense of national identity.⁹ I feel no urge to scrub the wall clean. John Rawls's rewriting of Lincoln's Second Inaugural would be offensive if it did not come off as quite so silly.¹⁰ For going on three centuries now, we have lived "under the canopy" of words and practices of Christian provenance from which no right-minded and even modestly self-confident non-Christian can possibly feel excluded.¹¹ I am a Burkean—or rather, perhaps, a Symmachian!—for whom traditions count. They should not be discarded lightly. The words on the dollar bill, at a prosaic level, and Lincoln's, at a more exalted one,¹² are part of my American identity. They help to anchor my sense of belonging to a community whose values, however global their reach, remain those of a people with a unique history of sacrifice and suffering. This community is bound together not only by its commitment to the principles of freedom and equality—which apply everywhere at all times—but by the very special symbols of ultimate value under whose sign our predecessors made the sacrifices they did.

I would not know what to replace them with. And it seems certain, to me at least, that for the foreseeable future, no version of the modern paganism Smith describes will be able to generate a set of rituals, symbols, sacred texts and the like, that have a comparable power to sustain what Lincoln calls the "mystic chords of memory."¹³ I am a pagan, but I am a patriot too. The campaign to cleanse our imagined community of every reference to the creator God of the Abrahamic religions is as misguided as the not-

9. See, e.g., *id.* at 268 ("In the American republic, likewise, from the founders to the present, statesmen and citizens have appreciated the significance of public symbols. Through much of the nation's history, central symbols have been biblical in character.").

10. See *id.* at 275 (citing JOHN RAWLS, *POLITICAL LIBERALISM* 254 (expanded ed. 2005)).

11. *Id.* at 350 (citing RAWLS, *supra* note 10, at 247–51) (presenting Rawls's opinion that "divisive Truth" and "potentially disruptive 'comprehensive doctrines'" should be kept separate from the political community to allow deliberation "under the canopy of a shared 'public reason'").

12. See *id.* at 281.

13. See ABRAHAM LINCOLN, *INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES*, S. EXEC. DOC. NO. 1, at 10 (Spec. Sess. 1861).

unrelated passion for renaming that is sweeping America's campuses—including my own.

In all these respects, Smith and I stand on the same ground, and I am prepared to make common cause with him. From a political and legal point of view, this may be all that matters. Amidst the sound and fury of the culture wars, theological disagreements of a rarified sort are almost certain to be drowned out. But a good part of Smith's book is devoted to the meaning of modern paganism, and I am confident he will want to know why I think his account of it is incorrect and incomplete. Nothing of public consequence follows from my criticism of his views. Our disagreement is, in this sense, a purely private one. Yet it is not for that reason unimportant: it is the kind of disagreement that arises between two philosophers when they retire from the realm of law and public morality to consider some important matter and discover that their views differ sharply—though both believe, with all their hearts, that settling the dispute between them has the urgency that Augustine long ago ascribed to his own search for the truth.

II. PROGRESSIVE PAGANS?

Before I begin, though, I must make three further prefatory observations.

The first is that the inspired champions of what Smith calls “modern”—or more revealingly, “progressive”—paganism share a conception of the sacred that is more Christian than pagan in both origin and character.¹⁴ It is true they do not appeal to a supernatural God to support their position.¹⁵ But the ideal of human personality on which they base their arguments for the elimination of religious symbols from public life as a dignitary wound to those who do not affirm their meaning;¹⁶ for protecting every expression of sexual orientation as an inalienable privilege of autonomous self-definition;¹⁷ and for refusing to accommodate the evangelical baker on the grounds that his conscientious belief in the sinfulness of the union of the couple who asks for his services insults their dignity as free and equal persons:¹⁸ the ideal of personality on which *all these arguments* rest is based on a Kantian vocabulary that itself is Christian through and through.¹⁹

14. SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 360.

15. *See id.* at 370.

16. *See id.* at 275–77.

17. *See id.* at 285–86 (discussing the sexual revolution in America and the declining importance of “sexual morality” . . . because, according to a common assumption, sex is a normal, healthy human activity that does not *intrinsically* call for moral restrictions”).

18. *See id.* at 362.

19. *See id.* at 228.

For Kant, nothing in our natural being either explains or justifies our membership in a “kingdom of ends” or the right to equal respect this entails.²⁰ That depends only and wholly on our power, as “noumenal” beings, to act in accordance “with the conception of laws,” or, in Rawls’s more down to earth formulation, to live according to a plan.²¹ To grasp the universality of this power and the perfect equality of its distribution among human beings, we must start by removing—in our imagination at least—all the natural characteristics that distinguish one person from another and by staunchly refusing to assign any intrinsic worth to them. Kant’s idea of a supernatural kingdom of ends, and our membership in it, is directly derivative of the Christian conception of our vocation as finite rational beings created in God’s image.²²

Kant himself remained attached to the idea of an “author of the world.”²³ Indeed, in his view, the assumption of such authorship was a transcendental requirement.²⁴ His contemporary followers have—for the most part—abandoned this idea.²⁵ But they continue to subscribe to the moral and political philosophy that Kant constructed on the basis of his Christian metaphysics, though without the God he thought indispensable to it.²⁶ They are Kantians without God. *That* is their religion and the supernaturalism on which it rests—expressed in “innerworldly” terms as the belief that what makes every human being infinitely precious is something *other than* the sum of his or her natural properties—is, to put it mildly, difficult to reconcile with the belief that the world has an intrinsic value of its own.²⁷ This is the conviction that Smith concludes is the essence of the paganism he associates with Ronald Dworkin, Barbara Ehrenreich, and others.²⁸ At best, their paganism is an incoherent mélange of naturalist

20. Robert Johnson & Adam Cureton, *Kant’s Moral Philosophy*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Feb. 19, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#KinEndFor> [<https://perma.cc/HZ79-2YQ5>].

21. Leif Wenar, *John Rawls*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Jan. 9, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/#StaOveCon> [<https://perma.cc/D4ZP-RYA2>].

22. *See Genesis* 1:27.

23. Garrath Williams, *Kant’s Account of Reason*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Mar. 30, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-reason/> [<https://perma.cc/KH8W-U2CH>].

24. *See id.*

25. *See, e.g.,* Andrews Reath, *Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant*, 26 J. HIST. PHIL. 593, 594 (1988).

26. *See id.*

27. Sung Ho Kim, *Max Weber*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Nov. 27, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/> [<https://perma.cc/VP5Y-UX36>].

28. *See* SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 13–14.

and supernaturalist beliefs. But, in most cases, the supernaturalist motif is the stronger one, and their so-called paganism is better described as a species of godless Kantianism coupled with the longing for a world that has inherent value, which their own post-Christian morality rules out as a matter of principle.

Second, Dworkin and Ehrenreich are a poor place to begin if one wants to explore the theology of modern paganism in a serious way. Ehrenreich has little of philosophical interest to say about the subject. Dworkin, by contrast, is a thinker of the first rank. But his little posthumous book on religion gives its readers nothing of substance to chew on. Dworkin's invocations of Spinoza and Einstein are suggestive at best.²⁹ They are not a substitute for philosophical argument. Nor are the examples he gives of what he means by our experience of the sacred (the Grand Canyon, et cetera).³⁰ Indeed, these strike me as rather juvenile—like the gushings of a teenager who has just read Hermann Hesse for the first time. If he had lived, might Dworkin have gone on to develop his “religion without God” into something more impressive?³¹ Perhaps, but I have my doubts; I do not see how he could have reconciled his supernaturalist Kantianism with his new-found love of the world for its own sake. My guess is that any attempt on his part to develop a theology adequate to the latter experience would have been stymied by his lifelong aversion to the endorsement of comprehensive views of the good, which his commitment to a certain conception of political liberalism strongly encouraged.

Third, and finally, the only version of paganism worth considering in a careful way is what Smith calls “philosophical.”³² A philosophical pagan may happily concede that his less reflective brothers and sisters should be allowed to worship the earth and sky and dance like the villagers in T.S. Eliot's *East Coker*:

Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of the beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.³³

29. See RONALD DWORKIN, *RELIGION WITHOUT GOD* 39 (2013).

30. See *id.* at 2–3.

31. See generally DWORKIN, *supra* note 29.

32. SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 93–94.

33. T.S. ELLIOT, *East Coker*, in *THE POEMS OF T.S. ELLIOT: COLLECTED AND UNCOLLECTED POEMS* 185, ll. 40–46, at 186 (Christopher Ricks & Jim McCue eds., 2015).

But he is bound to regard all these practices and beliefs as superstitious nonsense. This is the way, more or less, that Edward Gibbon viewed the pagan religion of the Romans in its practical aspects.³⁴ For anyone seriously interested in the question of whether modern paganism is “true,” the only answer that counts is the one a philosophical defender might give.

So, *is it true?* This depends on what we mean by modern paganism and that in turn on what we mean by paganism more generally. For that, we must go back to the ancient world—but not to the Romans, as Smith does.³⁵ We have to go back to the Greeks.³⁶

For an account of what he calls the “philosophy” of Roman religion, Smith relies on a dialogue of Cicero’s that reports a fictional conversation among three philosophers concerning the existence and nature of the gods.³⁷ It is a thin and unoriginal work which, like Cicero’s other philosophical writings, draws on earlier traditions of Greek thought.³⁸ Elsewhere, Cicero ruefully acknowledges his own dependence, and that of the Romans more generally, on their Greek forebears in the realm of speculative thought.³⁹ The great achievements of the Romans, he says, lie in the fields of law and administration instead.⁴⁰ If we want to give philosophical paganism a really serious hearing, we therefore need to put Cicero’s genial but derivative work aside and turn to the fantastically rich well of Greek philosophy from which the ideas even of Cicero’s contemporary Lucretius, undoubtedly the greatest of all the Roman philosophers, derive.

When we turn to the Greeks, we find ourselves confronted with an embarrassment of riches. We might, for example, begin our inquiry with Plato, whose influence on ancient, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy

34. See SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 11.

35. See *id.* at 3.

36. See RONALD HUTTON, *THE TRIUMPH OF THE MOON: A HISTORY OF MODERN PAGAN WITCHCRAFT* 13 (1999); John Opsopaus, *Hellenic Neo-Paganism*, BIBLIOTECA ARCANA (Dec. 22, 2018, 4:51 PM), <http://opsopaus.com/OM/BA/HNP.html> [https://perma.cc/ETD9-2T7U].

37. SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 89–90.

38. See *generally, e.g.*, 19 CICERO, *DE NATURA DEORUM* (G.P. Goold ed., H. Rackham trans., Harvard Univ. Press 1994) (c. 45 B.C.E.).

39. See H. Rackham, *Introduction* to CICERO, *supra* note 38, at vii, xii (“As my habit is, I shall draw from the fountains of the Greeks at my own judgement and discretion.”).

40. See CICERO, *DE FINIBUS BONORUM ET MALORUM* bk. IV, 367–69 (H. Rackham trans., Harvard Univ. Press 1931) (c. 45 B.C.E.).

was immense.⁴¹ Even Galileo thought of himself as a Platonist in an important sense.⁴² But that would be a poor choice if what we want is a philosophical defense of the outlook Smith defines as the “pagan” view of the world.⁴³ A pagan, Smith says, is one who believes the world possesses an inherent divinity of its own.⁴⁴ He affirms that God is in the world, or identical to it, not a being who “transcends” the world—a slippery word about which I shall have more to say in due course.⁴⁵ If we are looking for a philosophy that offers a self-conscious and systematic defense of this view, the central teaching of Plato’s metaphysics is too ambiguous to do the job.

Plato did not think of the relation between the one and the many—between the ideas and their reflections—as that of a creator to its creatures, but as a relation of imitation or participation instead.⁴⁶ The demiurge of the *Timaeus*, moreover, is not a true creator but a craftsman who joins pre-existing principles to a body of primal material already on hand.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Plato’s depreciation of what in the *Republic* he calls the world of “sight” and “sound,”⁴⁸ and the proto-creationist myth of the *Timaeus*,⁴⁹ seemed immediately congenial to many later Christian thinkers—Augustine included⁵⁰—and appeared to prefigure their own view that the world has no divinity of its own but depends for its intelligibility and value, indeed for its very being, on a God who exists apart from the world and antecedently to it, and freely brings it into being from nothing.⁵¹ So, Plato and his exegetes down to Plotinus and Proclus—who had a huge influence on the “negative theology” of Christian metaphysicians from the Pseudo-

41. See Paul Vincent Spade, *Medieval Philosophy*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Apr. 6, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-philosophy/> [<https://perma.cc/ZF9B-MGK9>].

42. See Mario De Caro, *On Galileo’s Platonism, Again*, in HYPOTHESES AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE 85, 85 (Raffaele Pisano et al. eds., 2018); see also ALEXANDRE KOYRÉ, *GALILEO STUDIES* 74 (John Mepham trans., Humanities Press 1978).

43. SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 11.

44. *Id.* at 114.

45. See *id.*

46. See Richard Kraut, *Plato*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Aug. 1, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=plato> [<https://perma.cc/5TL7-NCYA>].

47. Barbara Sattler & Donald Zeyl, *Plato’s Timaeus*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Mar. 24, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-timaeus/> [<https://perma.cc/8ZBP-3HPL>].

48. PLATO, *THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO IN TEN BOOKS* bk. VII, at 213–14 (Ernest Rhys ed., H. Spens trans., J.M. Dent & Co. 1908) (c. 380 B.C.E.).

49. See Sattler & Zeyl, *supra* note 47.

50. See generally AUGUSTINE THROUGH THE AGES: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA (Allan D. Fitzgerald et al. eds., 1999) [hereinafter AUGUSTINE].

51. See generally *id.*; Sattler & Zeyl, *supra* note 47.

Dionysius to Eckhart and even on thinkers with as strongly rationalist an orientation as Thomas Aquinas—do not give us the best material from which to reconstruct the most philosophically compelling account of the immanentist theology to which a thoughtful pagan of the ancient sort might subscribe.

III. ARISTOTLE

A better choice is the philosophy of Aristotle, who in Raphael's famous painting is pointing down to the earth and not, like Plato, up to a sphere beyond it. Aristotle's God is a thoroughly immanent one, in Smith's sense of the term.⁵² There is another reason, too, for beginning with Aristotle, although I will not pursue it at length here. The late medieval physics based on Aristotle's recently recovered writings on nature was the target of the fundamentalist revival that in the name of the world-transcending, all-powerful God of the bible first challenged Aristotle's picture of the world in a radical way.⁵³ In so doing, it laid the foundations for what, in the next three centuries, would become the recognizably modern physics of Copernicus,⁵⁴ Galileo,⁵⁵ Descartes,⁵⁶ and Newton.⁵⁷

Modern science was born in a theologically-motivated reaction against Aristotle's metaphysical immanentism.⁵⁸ In this sense, its beginnings were religiously inspired. If science today seems a profoundly anti-religious force, this was not always the case. But to understand how and why the science that now surrounds us—and to which so many godless secularists appeal for support—first emerged from a theological quarrel over the very two views of divinity that Smith calls "Christian" and "pagan,"⁵⁹ one needs first to grasp

52. See generally SMITH, *supra* note 1.

53. For background on Aristotle's metaphysics, see Marc S. Cohen, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Oct. 19, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/> [https://perma.cc/K3D7-6X22].

54. See Sheila Rabin, *Nicolaus Copernicus*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Aug. 5, 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/copernicus/> [https://perma.cc/H2R5-J6BW].

55. See Peter Machamer, *Galileo Galilei*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (May 10, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/galileo/> [https://perma.cc/T5ST-NFW2].

56. See Edward Slowik, *Descartes' Physics*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Aug. 22, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-physics/> [https://perma.cc/D698-48RE].

57. See George Smith, *Isaac Newton*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Aug. 29, 2008), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/newton/> [https://perma.cc/2RWC-CNAQ].

58. See generally Glanville Downey, *Aristotle and Modern Science*, 57 CLASSICAL WORLD 41 (1963).

59. SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 167.

the latter view in its original Aristotelian form, for it was to this that the Bishop of Paris reacted with evangelical fervor in his Condemnation of 1277.⁶⁰ Others have told the story at great length, among them Pierre Duhem⁶¹ and more recently, Hans Blumenberg.⁶² But the fact that the Condemnation of 1277—which Duhem calls the “birth certificate” of the modern age⁶³—was inspired by a holy hatred of Aristotle’s immanentist theology gives us an additional reason to take the latter as our starting point in the search for a philosophically adequate understanding of paganism, as opposed to the thin and unconvincing version that Cicero puts in the mouth of his Stoic spokesman Balbus.⁶⁴

Aristotle’s overarching aim might be described in John Wisdom’s lovely phrase: “to find the order in the drama of Time.”⁶⁵ Living things, ourselves included, come and go. We’re born, live for a while, then die. Warmed by the sun, water rises and forms clouds, then falls again as rain. Even the heavenly bodies—which Plato calls the “visible eternal”—are one place today and another tomorrow, revolving in their endless circles in the sky.⁶⁶ Everything in the world dances to the music of time. But the order of the music—its arrangement or score—never changes. It has always been and will always be what it is at any moment. This order is not, moreover, something apart from the movements of the things we see in the world about us. It is the shape or rule or form of these movements themselves and can no more be detached from them than the score of a Beethoven symphony can be separated from the sounds of the orchestra that plays it. It is the principle of changelessness in change, without which motion would be chaos rather than a structured movement from here to there: from childhood to maturity, solstice to equinox, or cold to hot when a stone is placed near the fire.

This order is eternal in a twofold sense. First, it is everlasting: it has no beginning or end in time.⁶⁷ Second, it is necessary: its nonexistence is

60. See Hans Thijssen, *Condemnation of 1277*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Nov. 19, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/condemnation/> [https://perma.cc/U7BK-WTUE].

61. See *id.*

62. See Alexander S. Jensen, *The Unintended Consequences of the Condemnation of 1277: Divine Power and the Established Order in Question*, 41 COLLOQUIUM: AUSTRAL. & N.Z. THEOLOGICAL REV. 57, 71 (2009).

63. Douglas M. Jesseph, Essay Review, 1 J. INT’L SOC’Y HIST. PHIL. SCI. 317, 319 (2011).

64. See Malcolm Schofield, *Cicero for and Against Divination*, 76 J. ROMAN STUD. 47, 57 (1986).

65. SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 27 (quoting John Wisdom, *The Meanings of the Questions of Life*, in THE MEANING OF LIFE 257, 258–59 (E.D. Klemke ed., 1981)).

66. Anthony T. Kronman, *Civility*, 26 CUMB. L. REV. 727, 748 (1996).

67. *The Beginning of Time*, STEPHEN HAWKING (1996), <http://www.hawking.org.uk/the-beginning-of-time.html> [https://perma.cc/6YYV-BEV3].

unthinkable.⁶⁸ It is inconceivable that it *not not be*.⁶⁹ In this respect, the eternal order of the world, and therefore the world itself, differ from my existence as an individual human being.⁷⁰ That I *not be* is perfectly conceivable. In this sense, my existence is contingent, not necessary. Later Abrahamic philosophers, beginning with Avicenna, stressed exactly this point in distinguishing their views from that of Aristotle.⁷¹ The existence of the entire world, they said, is as contingent as that of every individual in it.⁷² Only the God who creates the world, from a position beyond it, exists by necessity.⁷³ Everything else is contingent, including the order or form or shape of the world, which Aristotle believed to be not only everlasting but necessary as well.⁷⁴ This crucial metaphysical distinction was the bone of contention that moved the neo-Augustinian champions of orthodoxy at the end of the thirteenth century to condemn the Latin Averroists with such religious fervor.⁷⁵ That drove a permanent wedge between Aristotle's old and soon discredited physics and the new one that was aborning.

But this distinction—deep as it is—should not obscure an even deeper point of agreement between the Aristotelians and their Christian opponents. For both, the “drama of Time” is intelligible only on account of its connection to something eternal, which lasts from age to age and exists by necessity.⁷⁶ Only this relation secures the explicability of what happens in time.⁷⁷ It alone gives the appearance and disappearance of things its meaning. In particular, we could make no sense of our mortality without it.⁷⁸ The nature of the relation between time and eternity is therefore the most serious subject of all. It is the one to which all our other studies must be directed and an occasion for the highest sort of joy, wonder, and exaltation that any human

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. See Ivano Dal Prete, “*Being the World Eternal . . .*”: *The Age of the Earth in Renaissance Italy*, 105 *ISIS* 292, 297 (2014).

71. Sajjad H. Rizvi, *Avicenna (Ibn Sina)*, INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL., <https://www.iep.utm.edu/avicenna/> [<https://perma.cc/8B28-5TR6>].

72. *Id.*

73. Olga Lizzini, *Ibn Sina's Metaphysics*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Mar. 28, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-sina-metaphysics/> [<https://perma.cc/2ZC6-MSA7>].

74. *Id.*

75. See *Latin Averroism*, ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA (Apr. 28, 2009), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-Averroism> [<https://perma.cc/57V3-4LCT>].

76. See *supra* note 65 and accompanying text.

77. Lizzini, *supra* note 73; see also SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 118.

78. See generally *The Beginning of Time*, *supra* note 67.

being can know. This was Aristotle's view.⁷⁹ But so do Augustine⁸⁰ and Aquinas.⁸¹ It is true that in the first case, the eternity to which the comings and goings of things must be related in order to make sense and have any meaning at all is the eternity *of* the world and in the second case, an eternity *beyond* it. But however important this difference may be, viewed from a sufficient distance it might be described as a family quarrel. From this perspective, the nihilist stance that some contemporary secularists at least pretend to adopt is wholly incomprehensible for it rests on the contention, which none of the three thinkers I have just mentioned would have found intelligible let alone appealing,⁸² that we can get by just fine without any conception of eternity at all, and must learn to find what meaning we can, in life and the world as a whole, as grownups who no longer need such a childish crutch.

I do not think that nihilism of this sort is philosophically coherent, and I certainly do not find it to be an attractive guide to life—or even a humanly bearable one for that matter. But I put the defects of nihilism aside for the sake of considering the virtues of the two competing conceptions of eternity from which Aristotle and his Christian successors begin. Any philosophically responsible judgment about the comparative “truth” of the modern pagan and orthodox Christian conceptions of God must start here.

For Aristotle, every being in the world has a share in eternity.⁸³ Like Plato before him and Plotinus after, Aristotle equated the eternity that is resident in finite things—this cat, that star, a drop of water, you and me—with the principle of intelligibility that explains their characteristic movements, understanding the term broadly to include growth as well as “locomotion.”⁸⁴ Movement of any kind includes an element of “nonbeing.”⁸⁵ What moves is no longer where or what it was before; it has ceased to be in its previous place or state. But the principle or rule according to which the movement proceeds from one point to another does not “itself” move.⁸⁶ It is perfectly

79. See generally ARISTOTLE, *METAPHYSICS* (W.D. Ross trans., Univ. of Adelaide 2015) (c. 350 B.C.E.).

80. See generally AUGUSTINE, *supra* note 50.

81. See generally THOMAS AQUINAS, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGICA* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1987) (1485).

82. See, e.g., THOMAS AQUINAS, *ON THE ETERNITY OF THE WORLD* 46 (Cyril Vollert et al. trans., Marquette Univ. Press 1964) (1271) (“[T]he world existed from eternity. . . . [S]ince He produced the world at some time, He apparently has always produced it, from eternity.”).

83. See ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 79, bk. I.

84. *Id.* bk. XI.

85. *Id.*

86. *Id.*

motionless and therefore both timeless and necessary—eternal in the twofold sense noted above.⁸⁷

Different kinds of things move according to different principles. For each, its principle plays both a causal and a logical role.⁸⁸ It is at once a *source of motion* and the *explanation for* it. Crucially, for Aristotle, the same may—indeed must—be said of the world as a whole.⁸⁹ All the motions in the world must be both caused and explained by a single master principle from which every limited principle of movement derives. Aristotle calls this master principle the “unmoved mover.”⁹⁰ It is the logical and causal ground of the world as a whole whose eternity is guaranteed by the unmoved mover, which is not a principle or force apart from the world but its own inherent orderliness in whose presence every finite being shares according to what Aristotle calls the “powers” of its kind.⁹¹

Human beings share in the eternity of the world in a way that is unique, at least among living things on earth.⁹² Other earthly animals participate directly in the principle that gives their mortal lives a timeless regularity simply by living as they do and producing others like themselves who will do the same when they are gone.⁹³ Human beings also share in the eternal wheel of birth, growth and death, but unlike our animal friends, we are able to grasp in thought the principle that guides our lives and not merely live it out.⁹⁴ We are thinking beings as well as living ones, and because the power of thought has a universal range, we are able to comprehend not only the rule or principle of our own species-being but that of every other kind of thing in the world as well.⁹⁵ Indeed, we are able not merely to understand *what* these rules or principles are but *why* they have the timeless necessity they do.

87. *Id.*

88. *See id.*

89. *See id.* For an alternate argument to this singular force, see ORSON PRATT, GREAT FIRST CAUSE, OR THE SELF-MOVING FORCES OF THE UNIVERSE 8 (Liverpool, 1851).

90. ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 79, bk. XI.

91. *See id.* at 267.

92. *See id.* bk. I. I add the qualification because Aristotle believed the planets and stars to be living beings as well. *See id.* bk. XII.

93. *Id.* bk. I (“The animals other than man live by appearances and memories, and have but little of connected experience . . .”).

94. *Id.* (explaining that unlike nonhuman animals, “the human race lives . . . by art and reasonings” in addition to “appearances and memories”).

95. *Id.*

This latter understanding culminates in a fully articulable knowledge of the relation of all things to the “unmoved mover,” their ultimate causal and logical ground.⁹⁶ This is the highest knowledge that any human being can attain. Indeed, it is the highest knowledge that *any* being can attain. Aristotle describes the content of this knowledge in *Metaphysics*.⁹⁷ His fullest account of the experience of achieving it is to be found in the last book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁹⁸ The rest of the *Ethics* is devoted to an examination of the challenges of “practical life.”⁹⁹ But it is only in “contemplation,” Aristotle says, that our rapport with the eternity of the world is complete.¹⁰⁰ Because the intelligibility, meaning, and value of human life, like that of everything else in the world, depends on its relation to eternity, the activity of thinking, where this relation becomes an identity—for a brief time at least—therefore serves in Aristotle’s philosophy as a benchmark against which to measure the meaning and value of all other human “activities” including, in particular, those of a political kind.¹⁰¹

All this will be familiar to anyone who has spent any time studying Aristotle’s philosophy in even a casual way. I want now to describe three implications of Aristotle’s idea of eternity that may not be as immediately obvious but bear directly on any attempt to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses *vis-à-vis* the Christian idea of eternity. All three ideas follow from Aristotle’s characteristically Greek equation of eternity with intelligibility and of both of these with form.

In the Greek philosophical imagination, the principle of order that gives a thing its structure and intelligibility is always conceived, in plastic terms, as its “shape” or “form.”¹⁰² This is true not only of artificial things but natural ones as well.¹⁰³ In each case, it is a thing’s form that makes it what it is—that defines it.¹⁰⁴ In his famous account of the diverse ways the “existence” and motions of a thing can be explained, Aristotle identifies form as only

96. *Id.* bk. XI.

97. *See generally id.*

98. *See generally* ARISTOTLE, *THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* bk. X (J.E.C. Welldon trans., MacMillan & Co. 1912) (c. 350 B.C.E.).

99. *Id.* bk. I, at 15; *id.* bk. VI, at 188.

100. *Id.* bk. IV, at 109.

101. *Id.* bk. I, at 1–2, 24–25; *id.* bk. IX, at 307 (“One who sees perceives that he sees, and one who hears that he hears, and one who walks that he walks, and similarly in all our activities there is something in us which perceives that we exercise the activity But to *perceive* or *understand* that we perceive or understand, is to *perceive* or *understand* that we exist; for existence consists . . . in perceiving or understanding.” (footnote omitted)); *id.* bk. X, at 332–37.

102. Thomas Ainsworth, *Form vs. Matter*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Feb. 8, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/form-matter/> [<https://perma.cc/4BM8-CKLR>].

103. *See id.*

104. *See id.*

one among several.¹⁰⁵ But all the other ways are ultimately reducible to this one. In the end, the “formalist” explanation of a thing’s structure and behavior—which for Aristotle are not fundamentally distinguishable—proves to be the only way of accounting for them at the very deepest level.¹⁰⁶ Even materialist explanations depend upon the crucial assumption that the matter of a thing causes it to act and move as it does only because the matter in question is, as it were, “preformed”—that is, endowed with the power or potency to assume one form rather than another.¹⁰⁷ As a consequence, Aristotle’s seemingly complex account of the varieties of explanation is at bottom indistinguishable from Plato’s more straightforward identification of “intelligibility” with form.¹⁰⁸

From a theological point of view, the most important implication of this is that the aspect or component of a thing, which gives it a share in eternity, must also necessarily be finite as well. By “finite,” I do not mean limited in duration or accidental in origin. For Aristotle, the form of a thing is neither.¹⁰⁹ I mean, having a shape that delimits and therefore defines it—a ‘boundary’ or ‘edge’ without which it would be shapeless and therefore—given Aristotle’s equation of form and intelligibility—completely unintelligible.¹¹⁰

In Aristotle’s metaphysics, as in Plato’s, the concept of infinity describes a condition of boundlessness that resists all comprehension and *therefore*—the crucial *therefore* of Greek philosophy—lacks all being or reality as well.¹¹¹ To be infinite, for both Aristotle and Plato, is to be unreal. In their theologies, the concept of a principle of order that is at once eternal *and* finite is therefore not a contradiction in terms but a logical necessity.¹¹² This is hard for us to grasp; we are habituated by centuries of Christian

105. Istvan Bodnar, *Aristotle’s Natural Philosophy*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Jan. 8, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-natphil/> [<https://perma.cc/KF2Z-K7SR>].

106. Ainsworth, *supra* note 102; *see also* Marino Pérez Álvarez, *The Four Causes of Behavior: Aristotle and Skinner*, 9 INT’L J. PSYCHOL. & PSYCHOL. THERAPY 45, 48 (2009).

107. *See* Peter K. Machamer, *Aristotle on Natural Place and Natural Motion*, 69 ISIS 377, 380 (1978).

108. Allan Silverman, *Plato’s Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (July 14, 2014), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-metaphysics/> [<https://perma.cc/YPB7-GXWC>].

109. *See* Bodnar, *supra* note 105.

110. *See* Cohen, *supra* note 53; *see also* Machamer, *supra* note 107, at 380.

111. *See* A.W. Moore, *Infinity*, ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL., <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/infinity/v-1/sections/aristotle-1> [<https://perma.cc/F5PG-XMN2>].

112. *See* Ainsworth, *supra* note 102.

theology to think of these two properties as essentially joined.¹¹³ Aristotle's view is the opposite. Not only is each thing's share of *the eternal and divine* conditioned on the separation of these properties, but the eternity of the world as a whole is as well.¹¹⁴ Aristotle's finite cosmos was superseded long ago by the infinite universe we think of ourselves as inhabiting today.¹¹⁵ (The Condemnation of 1277 was the crucial first step in this process.) But if we want to grasp the feature of Aristotle's theology that separates it most fundamentally from any that a modern pagan might endorse today, we have to start by understanding that the finitude of the world was not, for him, a sign of its transience and contingency, as it is was for Augustine and all the Christian thinkers who followed in his path, but the necessary complement of the world's eternity instead.

This is the first and most important of the implications of Aristotle's view of eternity. A second is closely related: if the form of a thing alone makes it intelligible and thereby gives it a share in eternity—note the *thereby!*—then what cannot be explained by its form must be *mindless* and without any connection to what exists forever and by necessity.¹¹⁶ But natural and artificial things are not composed of form alone in the way that mathematical objects are. They are “hybrids” of form and matter.¹¹⁷ The latter is what distinguishes the individual members of each kind from one another. But it is not itself intelligible. It is true that we can understand the parts of a thing, but that is only because the parts themselves have a characteristic form of their own. *Their* individuality is no more intelligible than that of the thing of which they are parts. The upshot is that the uniqueness of each individual thing, whether it be a freestanding whole or the part of one, is not at bottom understandable at all. It is *therefore*—once again!—not only cut off from eternity, from the “really real,” but has not the smallest drop of *being* in it. It is in fact the *essence of non-being*. We of course have grown used to the idea that the individuality of individuals is not merely real but the most real thing about them. From our perspective, Aristotle's theology turns this truth on its head, as it surely does if one starts from the Abrahamic premise that every individual is infinitely “precious” in the eyes of God.¹¹⁸

113. See *Infinity and Eternity*, NEW CHRISTIAN BIBLE STUDY, <https://newchristianbiblestudy.org/exposition/translation/infinite-and-eternal/contents/> [<https://perma.cc/E6AA-XGHR>] (“In New Christian theology, there is an infinite, eternal God.”).

114. See Ainsworth, *supra* note 102.

115. See Mohan Matthen & R.J. Hankinson, *Aristotle's Universe: Its Form and Matter*, 96 SYNTHESIS 417, 418–19 (1993). See Thijssen, *supra* note 60.

116. See Thomas Davidson, *Conditions of Immortality According to Aristotle*, 8 J. SPECULATIVE PHIL. 143, 150–52 (1874).

117. Ainsworth, *supra* note 102 (“Aristotle famously contends that every physical object is a compound of matter and form.”).

118. *Isaiah* 43:4.

But if one starts instead with Aristotle's concept of form, and his use of the distinction between form and matter, to explain why individuals that share a common nature are nevertheless distinct, no other conclusion is possible.¹¹⁹

This brings me to the third implication of Aristotle's idea of eternity. It is logically inseparable from the previous two. If the highest state of reality that a human being can attain consists in the understanding of what is understandable in the world—in “mind minding mind,” as Aristotle puts it; if the world's intelligibility resides in the forms of things and, at the top of the metaphysical chain, in the cosmic principle of enformedness that Aristotle calls the unmoved mover; and if the form of the world, while eternal, is finite as well, then it must be possible for finite beings such as we to fully comprehend eternity—to get our minds around it, so to speak.¹²⁰ And this of course is just what Aristotle says.¹²¹

We may not be able to retain our comprehension for long. In this respect, we are unlike the planets and stars, which too are thinking beings but ones that spend eternity thinking about thought—though from ever-changing points of view so that even their contemplative activity falls short of the perfect motionlessness of its object.¹²² But in those moments of understanding, however brief they may be, we have all of eternity in our minds, without remainder. There is nothing about the God of the world that escapes us or remains to be explored.

That is the good news, one might say. The more disturbing news, for some at least, is that in these moments we have no individuality at all. If the peak of contemplation is complete, it is also wholly impersonal. The equation of eternity with intelligibility, and both of these with form, guarantees the one as much as the other. This was a particularly hard conclusion for theologians in the Abrahamic traditions to accept, as the fierce debate in all three over the question of personal immortality makes clear.¹²³

119. See ANTHONY T. KRONMAN, *CONFESSIONS OF A BORN-AGAIN PAGAN* 319 (2016).

120. *Id.* at 319, 555, 757.

121. *See id.*

122. *See id.* at 758.

123. *See id.* at 89.

IV. PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS

Aristotle's conception of eternity and the immanentist theology whose elaborate superstructure it sustained, including, in particular, the three implications I have mentioned, all came crashing down under the pressure of a radically different idea of God whose consequences for Aristotle's pagan theology were fundamental and far-reaching.¹²⁴

The biblical idea of God preserves the assumption, which Aristotle fully accepted, that the "drama of Time"¹²⁵ can be rescued or redeemed only by being related to eternity in some fashion.¹²⁶ But it transports eternity to a God beyond the world, with the result that the world itself ceases to exist either forever or by necessity. It further reimagines the relation between God and the world as one of will, not mind. The God of those who embraced this radically un-Greek view of eternity must now be thought of as having brought the world into being from nothing through an act of unfettered agency that God might have exercised however he wished—or not at all.¹²⁷ The consequences of this shift in the location of eternity and in the understanding of God's relation to the world touch every aspect of Aristotle's theology.¹²⁸

First, God must now be conceived as an *eternal* and *infinite* being. For Aristotle, these two properties are not merely disjoined. They are logically opposed. For those who believe in the creator God of the Abrahamic religions, the same characteristics are welded together with an iron necessity.

The Christian God is a timeless, necessary being. But the world that he creates is neither. It might not exist and could perfectly well have a different shape than it does. The world exists by the "grace" of God.¹²⁹ In creating the world and in giving it the order it has, God exercises a power of choice that is not constrained by any limits at all. Since Augustine, this power has been known as the "will."¹³⁰ In contrast to reason, as Aristotle understood it, the will is defined by its boundlessness or what today we call its "freedom."¹³¹ In this sense, its power is infinite. That is why Aristotle not only lacks an idea of the will in the Augustinian sense of the term but could not possibly

124. *See id.* at 337.

125. *See supra* note 65 and accompanying text.

126. *See* KRONMAN, *supra* note 119, at 107–08, 290.

127. *See id.* at 241.

128. *See id.* at 332. I ignore the complications presented by those Muslim, Jewish, and Christian philosophers who were prepared to grant that the world as a whole has no beginning or end in time so long as we acknowledge that its sempiternal existence is as contingent as everything in the world and therefore presupposes the ontologically prior being of a God whose non-existence is unthinkable.

129. *Id.* at 307.

130. Michael Mendelson, *Saint Augustine*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Dec. 7, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/#Wil> [<https://perma.cc/XL2J-5P6C>].

131. KRONMAN, *supra* note 119, at 408.

have formed one; it is also why, once God's creative freedom is assumed to be his most essential characteristic, it is necessary to think of him as a being that is infinite as well as eternal (for Aristotle, a contradiction in terms).

Some, of course, have tried to "tame" God's will by subjecting it to the requirements of reason.¹³² Aquinas¹³³ and Leibniz¹³⁴ are examples. But no orthodox Christian can accept such a view because it puts God's freedom "in chains."¹³⁵ The subordination of God's will to his reason represents a step back toward a pagan idea of God and must therefore be resisted at all costs. This is the key to understanding the meaning of the nominalist revolt against late medieval scholasticism and the Protestant Reformation that followed from it.¹³⁶ But so long as God's will remains perfectly free, the infinity and eternity of his divine nature cannot be pried apart. The Christian theology within whose matrix all the currents of Western thought and experience flowed from Late Antiquity on, fused these two characteristics in a fashion that made it impossible ever again to think of them as contradictory terms, in the way that Aristotle and his intellectualist predecessors had.¹³⁷

A second important consequence of the biblical revolution in theology follows directly from the attribution to God of an infinite will. If God's creative power is infinite, there can be nothing outside it to impede or deflect God's exercise of it. His creation must be *ex nihilo*, in the evermore rigorous sense that the Latin Church Fathers—with an assist from Philo—came to understand this term.¹³⁸ But this means that everything in the world owes its being to God—not just the forms of things but their

132. *See id.* at 557.

133. *See* Ralph McInerny & John O'Callaghan, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (May 7, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/> [<https://perma.cc/3LPQ-FXNJ>].

134. *See* Yitzhak Y. Melamed & Martin Lin, *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (June 9, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sufficient-reason/#WhyDidLeibBeliPSR> [<https://perma.cc/XAS9-RXHR>] (explaining Leibniz's approach to reason and God).

135. KRONMAN, *supra* note 119, at 338.

136. *See id.* at 866.

137. *See id.* at 336–37. As a historical side note, it is perhaps worth pointing out that although Plotinus remained firmly within the intellectualist tradition of Greek thought, his concept of "the *One*" prepared a bridge of sorts to the radically different idea of God that his Christian imitators embraced by defining the One as an infinite power beyond the limits implied by any predication at all, including that of "being" itself. Lloyd Gerson, *Plotinus*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (June 28, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/plotinus/> [<https://perma.cc/2XUV-G9A7>] (emphasis added) (describing "the One" as one of three basic principles of Plotinus' metaphysics).

138. *See* KRONMAN, *supra* note 119, at 238.

individuality as well.¹³⁹ The individuality of every individual must also be God's creative work and hence endowed with the same meaning and value the world as a whole possesses. This applies to all individuals but in a special way to human beings on whom God freely chose to confer the same freedom he possesses, though in our case joined to appetites, desires, and needs, making us creatures who are infinite in one way but woefully finite in another: the defining characteristic of the human condition as Christian thinkers down to Kant and beyond have conceived it. But this important distinction between our condition and that of God's other creatures—angels aside—does not alter the basic fact that the individuality of everything in the world owes its being to God and therefore has the same link to eternity as the general laws or principles that governs their movement. Nothing could be farther from Aristotle's pagan theology.

Third, and finally, the infinitization of God's eternal being means that as finite beings we can never fully comprehend him.¹⁴⁰ Only if we imagine that we shall one day be released from the finitude that now confines us within such narrow straits, is it even thinkable that our desire to know and worship God will be fulfilled. So long as we live in this world, the fulfillment of this longing remains beyond our reach. Christian mystics have for centuries claimed to have at least a foretaste of what this will be like. But the greatest of them, from Dionysius to Eckhart, have insisted that their wisdom can only be expressed in negative terms that recognize the incapacity of finite beings to convey the experience of closing the gap between themselves and God.¹⁴¹ Once again, Aristotle's confident belief that it is possible, in this life, to understand all that can be understood about God, if only for short periods of time, is worlds away from the Christian conviction that even the suggestion that such knowledge is attainable is an unpardonable act of pride.

V. A THIRD THEOLOGY

We are now in a position to make a side-by-side comparison of the two theologies I have described. Both insist that the "drama of Time" has meaning and value only in relation to eternity.¹⁴² Both also assume that the God who anchors time and saves it from chaos and unintelligibility exists not only eternally but necessarily as well. On the one hand, Aristotle's God is the eternal and necessary order of the world itself: it is finite, as all order

139. *Id.* at 279, 332.

140. *Id.* at 946.

141. *See id.* at 119, at 450–51.

142. *See supra* note 65 and accompanying text.

must be.¹⁴³ Because the individuality of individuals is due to their matter, as opposed to their form, it has no share in eternity. It has no reality at all. But by the same token, and for the same reason, a finite human being can, with enough effort, grasp all the reality there is. He can completely understand God.

The Christian God, by contrast, exists beyond the world. In one sense of that very ambiguous term, he “transcends” the world. Because his power is infinite as well as eternal, it can neither be constrained nor fully understood. The individuality of individuals is part of his divine creation too and even the most devout human being, who works with dedication for a lifetime to comprehend the majesty of God, can never take more than an infinitesimal step toward such understanding.

As between these two theologies, then, which is the truer? For a modern man or woman, the answer is clear. The Christian conception of God has more “religious truth.”¹⁴⁴

There are two reasons why this is so. The first concerns the value of the individual; the preciousness of every individual human being is something we all now take for granted.¹⁴⁵ Our deepest moral commitments and most widely-shared political ideals depend on this assumption. It is one that socialists, liberals, libertarians, and traditionalists share in common. But Aristotle’s pagan theology provides no basis for this belief. Indeed, it rules it out as a matter of principle. By contrast, the Christian idea of God ensures that our devotion to the sanctity of the individual has a solid basis in the answers we give to the most elementary questions of philosophy: Why does the world exist? Why is there a world at all? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the being of beings? Does everything have a beginning and end in time? Christianity has answers to all these questions and the inestimable advantage that it enjoys over Aristotelianism today is in part a consequence of the fact that the answers it gives undergird and support the reverence for the individual that lies at the heart of our most deeply entrenched practices and beliefs.¹⁴⁶

The second reason for choosing the Christian religion over Aristotle’s version of paganism is that the former explains, while the latter rules out,

143. See *supra* Part III.

144. KRONMAN, *supra* note 119, at 89. Again, I am putting to one side the nihilist who denies that the idea of eternity is needed to rescue the meaning of what happens in time or insists that the idea itself is incoherent.

145. *Id.* at 86.

146. See *id.* at 89.

the gap that exists between our comprehension of the world—ourselves included—and the comprehensibility that always exceeds it. The same is true of our efforts to live well, behave responsibly, and celebrate the world in art.¹⁴⁷ In every human enterprise, there is always more to be done than we have done so far—or shall ever be able to do, individually or collectively, in any finite stretch of time. Our aesthetic efforts, scientific pursuits, and personal spiritual struggles are all conditioned by the experience of the ineliminable gap between aim and fulfillment.¹⁴⁸ Nothing is more characteristic of modern life in all its domains. To the extent we are modern at all, we cannot escape it. Aristotle’s theology denies that such a gap can exist, but its Christian counterpart mandates it. That is another compelling reason for preferring the latter, if we must choose between the two.

But we need not do so. Our choice is not so limited. There is a third theology that fuses features of the other two in a distinctive way. It might be called a brand of paganism too, but it certainly is not Aristotle’s. A better way of describing it would be to say that it is a form of ancient paganism that has been transformed by its baptismal passage through the crucible of Christian belief. The result is a distinctively *modern* paganism that preserves the benefits of this transformation while avoiding the disadvantages of the Christian theology that prompted and guided it. If the God of the Christian religion is preferable to Aristotle’s, the God of this modernized paganism is preferable to the Christian version. This is the “religious truth,” as I see it, and remains such regardless of how few understand it and how little it contributes to the spirit of community on which the American adventure in religious freedom depends.

The basic outlines of this third theology are easily described. Its God, like that of the Christian religion, is an eternal and infinitely powerful being.¹⁴⁹ In this respect, it differs fundamentally from all forms of ancient paganism, including Aristotle’s. But the one, eternal and infinitely powerful being of my modern paganism is not a God separate from the world but the world itself—or perhaps it would be better to say the universe, or even the whole endless sequence of universes, past, present, and future, to avoid confusing the God of the world with what we now know is merely one small corner of it.¹⁵⁰ Yet even on this radically extended view of what Christians call the realm of “worldly” things—for whose expansion to infinity Christian theology itself is responsible—no gulf or gap exists between God and the world. Indeed, no gap of this kind *can* exist. The one extends as far as

147. See *id.* at 540.

148. See *id.* at 968.

149. See *id.* at 585.

150. See *id.* at 1065.

the other because they are the same, though we conceive them, as Spinoza says, in a phrase that Dworkin repeats, under “different aspect[s].”¹⁵¹

Viewed from one perspective, the world appears to be an infinite collection of individual beings—infinite in number and diversity too. Every one of these is finite: it is one place rather than another; has certain characteristics but lacks others; and lasts only for a part of time. But each is also an infinitesimal part of an infinite whole, and its own distinctive being cannot be understood apart from its relation to all the other individuals of which this whole is composed. Viewed from the latter perspective, every individual is a window on the infinite God of the world, and because each is different from all others, it offers a unique glimpse of a vista without limits.¹⁵² (The image is Leibniz’s.)

Because its own power—in contrast to that of the world as whole—is finite, no individual being, ourselves included, can ever grasp all the relations in which it is enmeshed. Neither can we express, in words and works, the infinite order these comprise. For finite beings, this remains a mere possibility but one that may be more or less fulfilled, even if never completely. In this sense, one might say that in the third theology I am describing now, God’s power has been transferred back to the world—where Aristotle originally placed it—from the “beyond” of the Christian religion, but in an infinitized form that Aristotle would have found incomprehensible.

The clearest expression of this is the *outward* infinity in number and kind of the individuals that together make up the world. But another is the *inward* infinity of every individual whose significance as a singular and irreplaceable perspective on the divinity of the world, without which the world itself would be incomplete, can never be fully grasped in any period of time. The latter *transcends* every conceivable state of understanding or appreciation that a finite being might achieve. It is a form of *transcendence*. But it is one that is internal to the world. It is an *immanent transcendence*, a phrase that may strike some as a contradiction in terms but only because they assume the truth of a theology in which transcendence is defined as the unbridgeable gap between the world and a God beyond it rather than as the “regulative ideal” that sets the infinite horizon of all finite striving—

151. DWORKIN, *supra* note 29, at 38–39.

152. See KRONMAN, *supra* note 119, at 936. For a slightly different overall concept but a clearly explained version of this world-view, see Brandon C. Look, *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Apr. 25, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz/#MetLeide> [<https://perma.cc/JQ3A-ZJ8L>].

of what Spinoza calls the “love of God.”¹⁵³ Smith begs the most interesting and important questions of “religious truth” by restricting the idea of transcendence to the Christian understanding of it.¹⁵⁴

At this point, one might reasonably ask whether my third theology is not just pantheism by another name—an ancient philosophy dressed up in new clothes. The answer is *no* and it is crucially important to understand why.

Aristotle’s metaphysics offers the most philosophically sophisticated defense of ancient pantheism, if by this we mean a theology that puts God in the world and distributes the world’s divinity across all the beings in it. There is nothing in Aristotle’s world that does not have a direct share in the “eternal and divine.”¹⁵⁵ But Aristotle’s pantheism locates the divinity of things in their form alone.¹⁵⁶ That is because it is conditioned by the finitist assumptions of Greek intellectualism generally.¹⁵⁷ In this respect, it resembles every other philosophical defense of ancient paganism. But the modern paganism I have been describing in the last few paragraphs is based on the rejection of these very same assumptions whose authority was first challenged and then shattered by the creationist theology of the Christian religion. The world pantheism, used without qualification, blurs this all-important distinction and discredits the version of paganism that one finds, in an exemplary form, in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, by suggesting that it is only a modestly updated version of an ancient theology to which no thoughtful person today can subscribe without radical revisions—which of course are precisely the ones that Spinoza makes.¹⁵⁸

But that is rhetorical ploy and not a philosophical argument. Moreover, the assimilation of the ancient and modern paganisms I have summarily described in this paper not only helps to give the theology of the Christian religion an unearned advantage in its competition with modern paganism but also obscures the crucial historical contribution that Christian theology itself made to the possibility of the emergence of a view like Spinoza’s—

153. Haim H. Cohn, *Spinoza’s Concept of Jewish Law*, 3 TEL AVIV U. STUD. L. 11, 17 (1977). Spinoza sees the knowledge and love of God as the “highest good” human reason can aspire to. *Id.*

154. See SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 113–14.

155. THEO GERARD SINNIGE, *COSMIC RELIGION IN ARISTOTLE* 33 (1972). This is premised on the eternity of motion with respect to the unmoved mover. See Bodnar, *supra* note 105.

156. See Richard Kraut, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (June 15, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/> [<https://perma.cc/P49U-VVGJ>] (“[T]he highest kind of good must be one that is not desirable for the sake of anything else.”).

157. See *id.*

158. See generally BARUCH SPINOZA, *Ethics*, in SPINOZA: THE COMPLETE WORKS 213 (Michael L. Morgan ed., Samuel Shirley trans., Hackett Publ’g Co. 2002) (1677).

or Einstein's and Dworkin's, if we take their reverence for Spinoza at face value.¹⁵⁹

This is a long and complicated story that others have told far better than I can—Hans Blumenberg's research is particularly important in this regard.¹⁶⁰ I only note here that if one looks for the point at which, on the “threshold” of modernity (Blumenberg's phrase¹⁶¹), the idea of immanent transcendence first began to assume a shape within the precincts of Christian theology that conformed to the aspirations of the new science of nature, which Spinoza enthusiastically endorsed, a very plausible candidate would be the writings of Nicholas of Cusa.¹⁶² Cusa invented his infinitely “unfolded” God in response to his longing to do justice to God's infinite power, which the nominalists of the preceding century had thrown into dramatic relief.¹⁶³ But Cusa's God soon escaped the limits of the Christian imagination altogether and gave birth to a re-born paganism—first in the hermetic philosophy of Giordano Bruno¹⁶⁴ and then in Spinoza's more systematic theology¹⁶⁵—that was as far removed from its ancient predecessor as it was from the Christian doctrine of divine creation that occupies the historical space between them and leads, in a dialectical fashion, from one to the other.

VI. THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD?

We are now in a position to ask how modern paganism (as distinct from the ancient version that Smith examines at such length) stacks up against the Christian theology to which he unfavorably compares it. I shall close with a few thoughts in response to this all-important question.

The two most important things that can be said in favor of the Christian religion when we compare it with the ancient version of paganism may also be said on behalf of modern paganism. The latter provides, just as Christian

159. See generally Gavin Basil McGrath, *Religious Liberty in Conservative Liberalism*, 40 AM. J. JURIS. 229 (1995).

160. See generally HANS BLUMENBERG, *THE LEGITIMACY OF THE MODERN AGE* (Robert M. Wallace trans., 1999).

161. *Id.* at 455, 470.

162. See Clyde Lee Miller, *Cusanus, Nicolas [Nicolas of Cusa]*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (June 8, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cusanus> [<https://perma.cc/5TX7-8P8G>].

163. *Id.*

164. See Dilwyn Knox, *Giordano Bruno*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Jan. 11, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bruno/> [<https://perma.cc/B9W8-TRNH>].

165. See generally Richard McKeon, *Causation and the Geometric Method in the Philosophy of Spinoza*, 39 PHIL. REV. 178 (1930).

theology does, a foundation for the value we now assign to the individual in every sphere of life. And it explains why, so long as we live, we are bound to fall short of our ambitions in every enterprise we undertake. These are two of the defining characteristics of modern life. We would not want to give them up if we could; any theology that fails to supply a foundation for them must therefore be dismissed out of hand. But the Christian religion and modern paganism do this equally well. In this respect, they stand on a par. But the former has three shortcomings the latter does not, and these, I think, tip the scales in favor of the modern pagan conception of God.

The first is a consequence of the doctrine of creation which Christianity shares in common with the other Abrahamic religions.

Creationism is an antiscientific idea. That is because it conflicts with the principle of sufficient reason on which all of modern science is based.¹⁶⁶ The principle of sufficient reason holds that for every question there is an answer, even though we do not know it and never shall.¹⁶⁷ It is compatible with the acceptance of our finitude and the countless limitations entailed by it. But it is not compatible with an idea of freedom, whether human or divine, that is so large that in principle there can be no explanation of why, in any particular case, it was exercised one way rather than another: every explanation of this kind assumes a relation of antecedent causation that contradicts the very idea of such freedom itself.

Put differently, science is necessarily deterministic and because the doctrine of creation is radically voluntaristic, there can be no room for it within the realm of science or, more broadly, in any world that assigns science the value and importance we do today. Even more obviously, the notion that one should worship God *because* his grace is incomprehensible to us contradicts the rationalizing aspirations of modern science in the most direct and obvious way. This is what the fight over the teaching of creationism in our public schools is all about.¹⁶⁸

By contrast, the modern paganism that I prefer to the creationist theologies of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam provides a metaphysical guarantee for the principle of sufficient reason—indeed, one might describe it as that principle writ large—and *simultaneously* explains why all our efforts to account even for the least of things is bound to fall woefully short. This seems to me a powerful theological advantage in an age in which science—understood in the most general sense as the disciplined search for a complete and

166. See Michael Ruse, *Creationism*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. (Oct. 10, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/creationism/> [<https://perma.cc/PT6A-PZNK>].

167. See Melamed & Lin, *supra* note 134.

168. See generally Don E. Scheid, *Evolution and Creationism in the Public Schools*, 9 J. CONTEMP. L. 81 (1983). For the record, I strongly favor teaching creationism—but in a class on religion, not one on physics or biology.

comprehensive understanding of the natural world, including ourselves as natural beings within it—enjoys greater intellectual and cultural prestige than perhaps any other human activity.

The second shortcoming of Christian theology *vis-à-vis* its modern pagan competitor is also one that all the Abrahamic religions share.

Christianity invites—indeed compels—its followers to love their fellow human beings and all of God’s other works as well. But they must be loved *as* God’s works and not on their own account.¹⁶⁹ To do so is a form of idolatry, no different than the worship of Baal. Anyone who says to his lover, “I love you for your own sake, full stop, period,” is not loving in the way a Christian should. The Christian love of one person for another is always indirect—or at least it ought to be.¹⁷⁰ It may be that few Christians think in these terms but that is because, like most believers in every faith, they pay at most irregular attention to the implications of the theology to which they subscribe. That is not bad in itself but it does mean that Christian doctrine, strictly construed, provides a poor foundation for the pathos of love, as most human beings experience it.

The experience of being joined in love to one particular other person by a bond that seems both fated and contingent, and of being utterly dependent for one’s happiness on the presence of the person one loves, who may disappear at any moment, is an experience we all know firsthand. Much pain is always mixed in it but many still consider love life’s greatest good. It is certainly the most democratic. But the Christian idea of God, which demands that we strive to love each person as a creature of the greater one who made them all, depreciates this very human good by forcing us to value it in a currency of a foreign kind. This is the lesson that Dante’s pilgrim learns, at the end of his long voyage, when Beatrice’s teenage smile is lost in the irradiating brightness of her all-encompassing love of God.¹⁷¹

169. See, e.g., 1 John 2:15–16 (“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not the Father, but is of the world.”); *id.* 4:7 (“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”); Genesis 9:6 (“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for God made man in his own image.”).

170. See James A. Devereux, *The Object of Love in Ficino’s Philosophy*, J. HIST. IDEAS 161, 164–67 (1969).

171. Edward Hagman, *Dante’s Vision of God: The End of the Itinerarium Mentis*, 106 DANTE STUD. 1, 16 (1988).

By contrast, the modern paganism that I am offering as an alternative to Christian theology allows us to love the ones we do directly and on their own account, because no person is the gift of an otherworldly God but a “mode” of God itself, to use Spinoza’s term.¹⁷² And it does this while insisting, as Christianity does too, that we are never able to love anyone as well as we wish. The shortfall in loving is a part of human love too, but to explain it we do not need the creator God of the Christian religion, who can only make us feel that in loving another person for no other reason *than that* he or she is unique in all the world, we fail to be sufficiently grateful to God for the grace of his far-greater love and fall into the arch-sin of pride.

A third and final shortcoming is peculiar to the Christian religion.

Christianity is set apart from the other Abrahamic religions by the doctrine of Incarnation, which Judaism and Islam both vehemently reject.¹⁷³ The doctrine of Incarnation depends, in turn, on the idea of original sin.¹⁷⁴ There is no way of prying the two apart. Since Paul’s first attempt at a “theology of the Cross,” the only way that Christians have been able to understand the passion of Christ is as the repayment of a debt that human beings lacked the power to repay on their own and *had incurred through their own wrongdoing*. To be in debt with no hope of relief is awful enough, but to be the cause of one’s own suffering is something even worse. It breeds resentment and, in time, is sure to poison the already ambiguous feelings of gratitude the recipient of such a gift is told he ought to feel toward the one who rescues him from his self-inflicted pain. Nothing does more damage to a human being’s relation to God than the doctrine of original sin: *the Christian doctrine par excellence*.¹⁷⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche grasped the point with characteristic depth and subtlety.¹⁷⁶ And like Spinoza—an odd couple if there ever was one—he, too, understood that the antidote to this singularly destructive idea is a new religion, which he called the “rebirth of Dionysus,” that restores the unity of God and the world but identifies eternity with infinite power as well—a combination of ideas that no Greek philosopher would have comprehended.¹⁷⁷

172. SPINOZA, *supra* note 158, at 217.

173. See Paolo Gamberini, *Incarnation at the Crossroad: The Doctrine of the Pre-Existence of Jesus Christ in Dialogue with Judaism and Islam*, 73 IRISH THEOLOGICAL Q. 99, 105 (2008).

174. TATHA WILEY, ORIGINAL SIN: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENTS, CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS 205 (2002).

175. See *id.*

176. See FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY AND THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS 225 (Francis Golffing trans., Anchor Books 1956) (1887).

177. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY AND THE CASE OF WAGNER 73–74 (Walter Kaufmann trans., Vintage Books 1967) (1872).

VII. CONCLUSION

For all these reasons, modern paganism seems to me a better theology than that of the Christian religion, for it captures the strengths while avoiding the weaknesses of the Christian conception of God. One further reason may be added: no theology can do without the idea of an eternal and necessary being. But the world is able to fulfill this requirement on its own without the need for a creator God beyond it. Because, as Ockham says, it is irrational to multiply entities when there is no need to do so, reason itself demands that we shave that otherworldly God with Ockham's razor once we have discovered that his agency is not required, as a conceptual matter, to sustain the eternal and infinite being of the world itself, except on the assumption that the world cannot possess these attributes on its own, which is to beg the question.¹⁷⁸

The theology of modern paganism thus has greater metaphysical economy than its Christian competitor. This is another point in its favor. The relation between them is like that of a training bike to a two-wheeler. The Christian religion has helped us learn to ride. It has accustomed us to the novel and, from an ancient perspective, wholly surprising idea that an eternal being can be an infinite one, too. But now that we have grown used to this idea, the notion of a God beyond the world, which first made it comprehensible to us in an easily understandable mythical form, is no longer required. Indeed, like the training wheels on a bike, its continued presence now interferes with our riding as smoothly and swiftly as we can. The time has come to let it go—or so the modern pagan claims.

But if we do, we lose the reassurance those training wheels gave us so long as we knew they would keep us from falling.

In the case of the Christian religion, these reassurances are two. The first is that death is unreal.¹⁷⁹ Devout Christians believe they will live on forever in some recognizably personal form after this life is over.¹⁸⁰ The second is that God loves us—that we are the objects of his care, just as the world as a whole is the product of God's providential plan.¹⁸¹

But a grown-up human being will not need the first as an antidote to the fear of death. It will be enough to understand that God exists and that while

178. See Roger Ariew, *Did Ockham Use His Razor?*, 37 FRANCISCAN STUD. 5, 5 (1977).

179. See ADRIAN WARNOCK, RAISED WITH CHRIST: HOW THE RESURRECTION CHANGES EVERYTHING 78 (2010).

180. See *id.*

181. See REINDER BRUINSMA, KEY WORDS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH 14 (2008).

one lives, it is possible to draw closer to the eternal God of the world through study, reflection, and loving, imaginative work, though the gap between oneself and God always remains infinitely large. The only real cause of despair is the nihilist's belief that no God of any kind exists, that there is nothing but movement and change, and that the idea of eternity is a fable. But that is a peculiarly modern species of childishness, too. Like his Christian counterpart, the modern pagan is immune to such despair but has no need for the idea of a personal immortality to anchor the meaning and value of his lifelong pursuit of a better and deeper connection to God, though he cannot help but feel the disappointment that attends the experience of always falling short. But disappointment is not despair. It is only what serious human beings experience as they go about the uneasy business of living. It is a sign of maturity to see that the meaning and value of life does not depend on a belief in a life after death and that no belief of this kind, however fervently held, can ever make life less fraught.

And God's love for you and me? Love is a kind of dependence. We love other people because our fulfillment depends on our being able to care for them for their own sake—something we long to do but never succeed in doing as well as we wish. Put differently, love is a sort of lack. It is the feeling one has for something one does not yet possess, or possesses insecurely. But if that is true, how can we make sense of God's loving us, or anything at all, unless we imagine him to be a dependent and needy being, too? We long ago came to regard the idea that God has a voice or a face or moods like ours as a childish superstition. The idea that God loves us just as we love him is an anthropomorphic mistake of the same kind. Of course, we love God. In modern pagan parlance that just means that we long to understand and express as much of the infinite and eternal reality of the world as we are able. But it makes no sense to ascribe to the object of our longing the same limitations that define our condition as finite beings. Yet that is precisely what I do when I transpose the love of other human beings, on which the meaning and value of my life *do* depend, to a God that I imagine as a person like myself, only larger and more powerful. This security blanket too is one that a thoughtful human being can live without. He or she will see that it rests on the same confusion as other simpler anthropomorphisms at which we have learned to smile.

Of course, I know how difficult it is to give up the false security the training wheels of Christian doctrine provide. But it does not follow that modern paganism is false. It only means that its truth is unlikely to be evident to more than a few. Yet has it ever been otherwise so far as *religious truth* is concerned? "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."¹⁸²

182. SPINOZA, *supra* note 158, at 382.

I also know that when we return from the closet to which we have retired for the sake of learning the truth about God, and descend again to the world of affairs, it would be laughably imprudent to insist others acknowledge the truth of my theology, or attempt to make of it a public doctrine that might serve as a source of political solidarity—all with new symbols, rituals, and the like. I am happy to concede that in these respects, my modern paganism is politically sterile.

So far as religion is concerned, our public practice should be one of tolerance and accommodation. To the extent the culture wars are a battle between opposing theologies, greater neutrality is called for. Those who attack the slightest endorsement of religion, who seek to scrub our history clean of every reference to God, who with evangelical fervor condemn even the conscientious judgment of some that others among us are living in sin, are zealots engaged in a religious campaign to vindicate their conception of the ultimate source of the meaning and value of human life—though their religion, as I suggested at the start, is a form of Kantianism that is more Christian than pagan in its provenance. They should not be allowed to capture the law for their partisan advantage. In all these respects, I am with Smith one hundred percent. But my political agreement should not be mistaken for an acceptance of the theological judgment he reaches at the end of his book,¹⁸³ which rests, I think, on a failure to appreciate the metaphysical distinction between paganism ancient and modern. Spinozism may be politically sterile. But it is theologically true, and one of the most precious freedoms our American system of religious liberty affords us is the freedom to argue extravagant propositions like this without the fear of anything more terrible than the bewilderment or disapproval of one's friends.

183. See SMITH, *supra* note 1, at 337–79.

