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Godless in Seattle

I recently became Catholic. To be exact, I became Catholic during the Easter Vigil of 2015 when both my wife and I were confirmed together. The experience was a wonderful one. We have a magnificent cathedral in our little city, one that has no business existing in small-town America. It's too beautiful, and it couldn't have been built except through the gold-monies that funded it a century ago during the Montana gold rush. We also have an outstanding bishop who, in the spirit of Pope Francis, engages his people pastorally, flexibly, lovingly, and in truth. To have received the holy chrism in this setting from a bishop and his right-hand monsignor, both of whom we greatly respect, and from our friend, the campus priest, was a blessing both my wife and I will remember for the rest of our lives. Heck, Grandma ("Maw," as our daughter calls her) even took care of the little one for the evening so that we could actually attend Mass and receive confirmation in peace, as in not having a

baby girl screaming with joy at all the smells, bells, and whistles. She'll get her turn soon enough.

I make this declaration of converted Catholicity knowing right off the bat that it's enough of a revelation



THE ACOLYTE

I was concerned
the moment you said
“holy chrism.”

to arouse suspicion. It would have with me just a year ago, and it may do the same if I hear someone begin a book in this way. A number of assumptions immediately arise in hearing someone make such a declaration, including the potential rigidity of the writer, the amount of identity the writer puts into making sure people know he's Catholic as a convert, and whether or not he's willing to allow dogs to go to heaven. Frankly, you get to ask what this declaration of Catholicity means and intends. That's why you also deserve an explanation, namely, why it's important to how I've written this book, and what you might do with it as you continue reading.

First off, I need to make something clear about myself in relationship to this declaration. I'm really quite grumpy. In fact, I'm downright cantankerous sometimes, and that grouch of a spirit will come out in my writing. I fear that you're likely to associate that surliness with my Catholicity, but please don't. I'm like the third-grumpiest Catholic I know, most of whom I've found to be quite joyful folks. Hollywood may view Catholics as grumpy

because Hollywood views *anything* as grumpy that doesn't fit exactly their agenda, but that means nothing about the reality of most Catholics' temperaments. (See! I told you I'm grumpy.) For this reason, I ask a favor: if you read a curmudgeonly statement, don't view it as coming from an old, Catholic man, angry with the world for who knows what—something Catholic, no doubt. View it merely as a nigh middle-aged, confused man, angry with the world for who knows what reason—something food-based, no doubt. I assure you that my anger with the world has nothing to do with my Catholicity and everything to do with my attitude, which is only just learning to be Catholic.

Second, I write this book from a fairly Catholic set of questions, and I fear that you'll think that I've taken up this Catholic method that I do *because* I'm Catholic, say, because I fear excommunication if I don't fall in line. My Catholicity was the endpoint of my journey into the question of God and not a predetermined beginning point. One major reason I converted was because I realized that I was already Catholic in my ways of thinking about God. I became Catholic because I think the tradition gets a lot

I'm glad my theology has evolved. I went to an apologetics camp as a teen and we were taught how to witness to Catholics.



THE DEACON

correct intellectually and spiritually. Catholicity was an unexpected destination for me.

This Catholic way of thinking pertains to the way I look at issues surrounding the concept of God. Don't get me wrong; not all the issues that I bring up have anything to do with official Catholic teachings, and much of what I say I've learned from the myriad of other traditions with which I've heartily engaged throughout my life. But the Catholic intellectual tradition generally distinguishes between two ways of talking about God: a way in accordance with *reason* (philosophically) and a way in accordance with *relation* (through faith or theologically). The way of reason brings with it questions about the meaning of the concept of God, why the concept we use is important, and whether that concept has any provable existence beyond, say, my purely wanting it to exist. The way of relation brings with it the question of God's significance for this world and whether God helps out at all, doing something more than merely floating in some eternal ether thinking through just how rad it is to be God.

In general, the distinction I make between a philosopher's God and a God of faith stands at the center of my God-talk, defining the types, manner, and meaning of questions I want to ask. You should simply know this fact as you have other important options for talking about God, even if I believe strongly that they will also have to contend with the one I'm unfolding. Before you render any judgment as to why I present the problems and issues surrounding God in this way, give me a chance to show you why I believe this manner of thinking important.

Rain, Rejection, and Reason

My thoughts on God don't stem from the story of an academic who's been summarily indoctrinated into a certain way of thinking. They stem from my story, and I come to this way of thinking about God conscientiously, seriously, and with a spirit of real inquiry. The reason that the question of God means so much to me stems from the ability of this distinction between the God of faith and reason to bring freedom.

I grew up in Seattle during the grunge era. I still wore sweatpants to school because I was in Middle School, something that I *absolutely* hold against my parents still for letting me do. But I was still in Seattle during the time and definitely old enough to catch the spirit of the age—the *Teen Spirit*, in fact. (Boom!) The demure mood affected everyone who breathed the pot-infused, bleary-eyed, wet, Seattle air.

I don't know a ton about grunge per se, but I remember through songs like Pearl Jam's "Jeremy's Spoken," Nirvana's "Come as You Are," and Soundgarden's "Spoonman" that it always dealt with someone being

The title for the Pearl Jam song is "Jeremy." I got the album through the BMG music club and hid it under my bed.

P.S. there's an F-bomb in the song.



THE BISHOP

socially outcast in a sort of proto-Goth type of way. It seems to have looked anxiously, defiantly, and with plaid-covered torsos at the meaninglessness of human life, critiquing the hordes of obedient persons who bought into false, hopeful, product-centered beliefs. In other words, grunge was French existentialism put to music, replacing cigarettes, coffee, and movies with pot, beer, and distorted guitars.

Seattle was a perfect place for this type of a movement to emerge. It was, after all, a boom-and-bust town throughout most of its history and started its incline into a major West Coast population center during the Klondike gold rush. It acted as a shipping and resupply point on the way to Canada and Alaska for the prospectors coming from the south and the east. So while its techie-yuppie feel of today might cover over Seattle's rough, blue-collar history like bad wallpaper covers over holes in drywall, Seattle's grounded in the grizzly and godless worlds of prospecting, timber-cutting, whoring, and jet-building (which is *far* more sordid than you think). Those worlds have stuck with Seattle in the sense that it's remained one of the most unchurched places in the country.

I grew up in a place where God was hardly an option for anyone. My family was semi-religious, but the culture was not. It was relatively inhospitable to questions of God, which I don't say to claim that people in Seattle were bad when I grew up there; not at all! Rather, it's this attitude that pushed me to search deeply, broadly, and intellectually for any answers in this divine arena. One event in particular eventually forced me into some deep questioning,

which the Seattle-ite in me could not allow to stay at the level of unexamined religious belief.

I introduce this event with a helpful life hint: believing in Jesus doesn't counteract bad health decisions, curing your heart from the effects of a lifetime of smoking and your belly from a lifetime of addiction to pancakes. If it did, the world would convert to the Christian faith by the billions, and we'd all be going to bed with a Slim Jim in one hand, a bag of Cheetos in the other, a Jesus-shaped hole in our hearts sucking all the calories out of these delicious snack-foods like a vacuum picks up loose fur. Nope, belief in Jesus didn't save my father from his bad decisions, and he, me, and my brothers paid the price for his preventable, congestive heart failure.

I lost my father when I was fifteen, just as I stopped wearing sweatpants to school. I needn't get into the difficulty of this loss, especially given my personal closeness to him, but I admit that I still think of him most every day in some manner.

This loss did end up bringing me into the hands of a very loving church family within the Assemblies of God, a charismatic movement that emphasizes the Spirit's call in all things, and a sentiment that I've brought with me wherever I've gone. The church members gave themselves to me as parents, mentors, brothers, sisters, and teachers, withholding from me nothing. I stand forever grateful for their deep charity.

While the love for that community remains, I'm obviously no longer a part of that movement. Part of that stems from the fact that I went to college to become a youth pastor at an Assemblies of God school, which

was a saving grace in certain ways and a faith-buster in others. No doubt, very good people worked, taught, and fed me spiritual insight at this school, but I also received a plethora of bad teachings. One of the most prominent of these pertained to a tit-for-tat type of a God, one who would bless you if you first blessed him, which you were usually supposed to do by hearing out and obeying this God's supposedly loving plan for your life. Also, it *felt* like the more people you racked up on the "saved" pile, the more saved you were yourself. This theology produced a crisis for me, which I think is best expressed through *My Name Is Earl*.

Sitcom Truth

I've become a huge fan of this show, and in an especially helpful episode for this particular dilemma, "O Karma, Where Art Thou," Earl runs into a problem. The problem is simple: Earl's conception of Karma isn't working itself out in the way that he thinks it should. Bad things are happening to him, a good person, and good things are happening to his boss, a bad person. I'll back up a bit.

My Name Is Earl is a story of a former petty crook, Earl, and he notices an important pattern in his life: every time something good happens to him, it gets taken away. In the first episode, Earl wins \$100,000 from the lotto, immediately gets hit by a car, loses the ticket, and ends up in a hospital where something important happens. He hears Carson Daly—a former MTV VJ for all you young folks—mention something to the effect that good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people,

which one of his friends tells him is Karma. He then makes a resolution to right all the wrongs he's done in his

How old is too old for
Carson Daly? What's
a VJ?



THE BISHOP

life, which he begins to do by making a list. After getting out of the hospital, Earl finds the lotto ticket again, dedicates the money to righting all his wrongs, and begins to rectify all the bad things he's done, which inevitably produces many hilarious antics.

In the episode in question, Karma isn't doing bad things to the restaurant owner, Mr. Patrick, even though he humiliates his employees, cheats on his wife, and probably kicks dogs. All Earl sees are the wonderful things Mr. Patrick has: a beautiful house, wife, lover, a restaurant of his own, a boat, and some other items that would be uncouth to talk about in a book concerning God. Things shouldn't work this way.

By the end of the episode, Earl socks Mr. Patrick squarely in the face, and we then see Mr. Patrick's body, and then life, go to hell like a row of malcontent dominos. His wife and lover show up at the hospital to check on him at the same time, leading his wife to divorce him and his lover to leave him. He gets booted out of his house, loses his restaurant in the divorce, and even ends up in prison for selling drugs. His life falls apart.

Earl feels bad at first, because rather than fixing something, he destroyed a man's life. Moreover, he believes that he has failed Karma in this situation by not doing something good. He's thrown into an existential crisis. Then Earl's brother, Randy, tells him that maybe Earl acted *for* Karma in this particular instance. Karma used Earl's fist to do its dirty work! Randy's absolutely correct, and the episode ends with a contented Earl drinking beer and knowing things worked out as they should have.

My name is Eric. In college, I found that I had a God-problem. The problem felt a lot like Earl's problem, that the things I had heard about God and the concepts that people have told me about God never added up to how I had experienced God in the real world. After all, in real life things don't work themselves out so cleanly as they do in *My Name Is Earl*, because bad things actually happen to good people and good things actually happen to bad people. Life is arbitrary but God is not, or at least we hope not.

At my college, I was fed the line that God blesses those who bless God. If I was faithful, God would be faithful to me. Of course, bad things had happened to me. I had lost my father, for one thing, and I wondered if it was my fault. After all, God must have preordained it, and most certainly someone was failing in their willingness to bless the good Lord. Perhaps my father died because I hadn't said the magical words "I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior" soon enough. Or perhaps my father secretly cursed the Holy Spirit, putting him in the front line of a divinely inspired death.

A Jewish friend of mine smirkingly claimed on one occasion, "We Jews know there's a God because He does

so many evil things to us.” Part of his smirk stemmed from the fact that I couldn’t tell for sure how serious he was. But the point reminds me of how silly we’ve gotten with some of our religious ramblings about God, which get so caught up in cultural sentiments, catchphrases, and colloquialisms that the God of relationship can be very difficult to take seriously.

Catchphrase theology is the leading cause of eye rolls in the church.



THE ELDER

That’s where the God of reason became freeing for me, and that’s why I took up a search for it fulltime. The cynical, grunge-driven Seattle-ite in me needed better answers, and I couldn’t just buy into the common culture of disbelieving in God without becoming like those who I viewed with some contempt at the time: weak-willed people who weren’t willing to search for answers to difficult questions. I was driven beyond the religious and secular cultures to which I had become accustomed, and I rejected their dismissal of the application of reason to God, taking up the question of God as an intellectual pursuit. The God of reason became for me a flashlight in a dark room where I could earlier *smell* that someone was hiding a dead, rotting fish—maybe even several—but couldn’t yet find it. No, without the light of the philosopher’s God, I’d have no hope of ferreting out these smelly mackerels of falsehood, and I had zero chance of ever finding anything like truth about God. Luckily, I found myself a flashlight in philosophy.

A Catholic Method, but an Open Conversation

Like I said, I talk about God in a very Catholic way in this book, and I take this Catholic embrace of God, which ascribes deep importance to the God of reason, to be anything but dogmatic: it's totally and completely freeing and has liberated my thoughts from the culture Christianity that holds sway in almost all arenas. To seek out and embrace the God of reason has been nothing but a boon for my spiritual life and how I think theologically.

Still, I don't write or think about this God of reason as an endpoint, the consummation of all proper God ideas. It presents a beginning point, and the polarizing-for-many-but-very-important Pope Benedict has something important to say in this regard:

This God of the philosophers, whose pure eternity and unchangeability had excluded any relation with the changeable and transitory, now appeared to the eye of faith as the God of men, who is not only the thought of all thoughts, the eternal mathematics of the universe, but also *agape*, the power of creative love.¹

The God of reason cannot be the end of our thoughts about God from a Christian standpoint, and I am very much Christian. The God of reason eventually has to be reconceived *relationally*. While the God of reason must help us to sift through the wheat and the chaff of our theological lives, we must also recognize that without the beautiful relationship we call faith, God simply doesn't matter except in the most intellectually abstract ways. Intellectual abstraction is important, but not enough.

In this regard, I'm writing this book to a twenty-year-old me. I want him to know some stuff that \$30K in student loans, poor life-decisions, marrying an awesome woman, reading lots of dead people, holding my first baby, and becoming aware of my impending death taught me about God and my issues with the concept, only I want my twenty-year-old self to have this wisdom without all the trouble. I want to show him a different path into the beauty of reflecting reasonably on God that he didn't know was available at the time, and I want show him the dignity of the limitations that our thoughts on God eventually succumb to in relation. I want my twenty-year-old self to know God philosophically and theologically, conceptually and spiritually, even if I only concentrate on the philosophical and conceptual for the most part. Alas, I doubt I'll listen.

To this end, I owe an answer to the question of why my Catholicity shouldn't be off-putting for the suspicious, and the answer's simple. For one, we all speak from where we are, and I'm no different. I speak from the standpoint of the tradition that I had embraced intellectually far

As long as where you are
doesn't dismiss where I
am, I am down to listen.



THE ACOLYTE

before I embraced it spiritually. Second, the fact of my standpoint doesn't mean that the book's catholicity makes it exclusively for Catholics. Rather, I think the Catholic

method used to talk about God in this book can be entered into a broader conversation, helping anyone who's interested in gaining freedom from their theological baggage, even if only by showing these persons how much they disagree with me! I'm good with that.