

Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me

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After years of desolation, dread, and death, bells ring, women shop, and planes fly in *Mrs. Dalloway*. By its publication, the '20s were roaring and within its pages planes were soaring “Away and away” shooting over puny “grey churches” and overshadowing them with the symbol of “man’s soul; his determination.”¹ It is a symbol of the supremacy of something beyond the now empty steepled tombs of Christian supernatural and other-worldly authority. Leaving the grounds of tradition and organized religion it is as if the plane booms forth into modernity.

Like other modernists, Woolf sought to find the sublime, the epiphany, and the unknown as something bound to the skies of this world. As Pericles Lewis writes, “Without submitting to the institutional religion of church or synagogue...[t]he modernists sought a secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural.”² What was to be found to worship and to enthrall would be found in the world around the modernists and in its gods and godliness. Woolf in particular looked towards the Greeks, paganism, and a certain spirituality.³ In comparison, God, Woolf would write, was an “old savage.”⁴

It was not just novelists of the period who sought to leave behind temples vacated by God. Charles Taylor writes that an advancing secular age confined worshippers to these private “gray churches” and separated them from the public workings and beliefs of their society so that, over time, fewer knees bent to worship a transcendent God.⁵ Over the shadows of these vacated, private spaces shot up the belief in the “fine young feller aboard,”⁶ the idea that human advancement was not piloted by a being separate from humanity and its material reality.

Compare this dual-dimensional rupture between celestial divinity and terrestrial ingenuity to the experience of the inhabitants of El Timpisque, Agua Blanca, Guatemala who were far removed from the former literary, philosophical, and Western societal imaginings. In the same milieu that readers of *Mrs. Dalloway* would read “The sound of an aeroplane boomed ominously into the ears of the crowd... actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Everyone looked up,”⁷ a sharp-blue-eyed daughter of Spanish immigrants looked up to a sound that would rend her world, a sound she could only describe as cloth tearing. Virgilia Castaneda’s, my bisabuela’s, illiterate eyes peered into the heavens seeing not words, but a heart-stopping symbol: a silver cross. Much like my indigenous ancestors who first heard tales of the white gods on their shores, Virgilia’s neighbors understood the first plane to tear across their lilac skies as an inescapable omen. The cross foretold death and destruction, the end of their very small world. In desperation, they gathered under the branches of a tamarind tree trembling as they embraced each other and, under the shadow of the cross, confessed every sin they had committed against their village and their God. This plane and its pilot signaled the death and failure of humanity rather than its supersession of the God who determined their ends and their beginnings.

As a descendant of this Castaneda line and the daughter of determined, loyal ultra-faith-filled generations of saints rooted in the very foundations of a religiously digressive modern institution—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—my family unusually never

experienced the rupture between a God-filled belief and their societal advancement. Thus, having been born into such a communion with the divine, I could not conceive of living a life separate from religious contemplative practice. So, when asked to rehearse how I have become a scholar of faith, how I have become an academic, religious mestiza, I did not conceive of a historical and static origin.

My Castaneda line especially instilled in me a lens of institutional religious interpretation. As shown in this episode, I was trained to understand the world in relation to God. This was not so for the secular age. Charles Taylor emphasizes that the secular, modern age was not an age of unbelief, but it did not believe as Christian believers did. As he distinguishes, “The big obvious contrast here is that for believers, the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is something beyond human life and/or nature.”⁸ I grew up on tales of my ancestors interpreting all aspects of their lives in reference to such a God and the supernatural world to which He belonged. On my father’s side, my bisabuela and her brothers lived in a twilight world, a world that was both here and there, the beyond. The devil met my bisabuela in the “bosque” of her world. He threw rocks at her and she retaliated by telling her grandson that this being from the beyond wore pink calzones, or feminine undergarments. On my mother’s side, miracles emphasized that a being loved and cared for the sacrifices and consecration of religious pioneers. After a run-in with a mill, my great-grandfather, Spencer Burke, emerged seemingly untouched, protected by covenantal religious garments he wore underneath his now-devastated clothing. They interpreted everything as God-related. And while my father’s family expressed this publicly, my mother’s family traveled miles to do the same.

In my own home, my parents demonstrated this same public and non-secular approach to understanding and day-to-day activities. One day, I became frustrated at this habit as I drove home with my mother. She had once again connected God to something that I thought seemed totally unrelated. I rolled my eyes and told her, “Mom, not everything is about God.” Days later, I pondered this response and concluded that I actually didn’t agree with it. Although my mom’s continual reference to religion and God could sometimes take God’s name in vain, I too saw him in everything and everywhere: I saw him in my geography class, I talked to him on my walks home from school, I prayed for Him and His peace during tornado warnings, and I felt him in my friends. But my academic experience with God was most enabled by a father, who, as a grandson of those who lived in supernatural twilight, taught me to see God in the intellectual. One day he told me, “Mila, do you realize that God created the fly? That he knows the very working of its shimmering wings, the science of his tiny black eyes. A fly, Mila, God cared about the internal workings of a fly.” My dad would later write that in the schools of our premortal existence, I sat in the front rows of his classrooms eager to learn all things from Alpha and Omega. His wonder compelled my search for truth within every learning environment I entered. For him, God was the ultimate poet, the first tailor, the most magnificent scientist, and an eternal social worker. I have continuously sought proof for these propositions in all my studies.

My professor at the University of Iowa, Lori Branch, would define this dual sensibility, this combination of proofs and propositions with an intuitive search for God, as postsecularity. In my case, secularity never entirely took center stage although it was ever present in my academic and religious experiences. Much of this outside influence inherited a schism where, Branch would argue, “faith, religion, uncertainty, superstition, and irrationality” surrendered to “hard

materialism.”⁹ We see residuals of this philosophical sundering in both religious and academic spaces.

As a Latinx scholar who holds no binary opinions between religion and university studies or, in a similar vein, between community activism and my academic and religious work, I felt *Brown Church* by Robert Chao Romero expressed why I hold paradoxical allegiances in this secular academic space. After describing the personal plights of Chicano scholars, Romero determines, “Because of the inherent bias against Christianity in Chicana/o studies, the objective study of religion is squelched despite the fact that faith is central to our families and communities and has been a key source of community organizing for centuries.”¹⁰ While I live a “post” existence in many ways as an academic daughter of U.S./ Guatemalan, Spanish/Indigenous, and religious parents, the field I have chosen to pursue is hesitant to enter that same mestizahood. For valid historical reasons, it might be difficult to take potentially colonizing sources like religion and academia and combine them within a field where they have both wreaked havoc. I have sought to find redemption from these moments, however. I saw this particular havoc within one of the most iconic Christian figures worldwide: Mary. It is popular and valid among Latina/e scholars to interpret Mary as a symbol wielded to colonize and subject women. For example, the Spanish colonizers toppled Indigenous goddesses and embedded the Virgin Mary in their place, and then, despite years of interpretations of Mary as a powerful coequal with God, Mary came into modernity translated by the intellectual clergy as a cloistered woman who subjected women to a wholly impossible purity. On the other hand, however, attention to Mary, religious, and Indigenous practices helped me to come to understand the complexities of our divine mother, to see her as a key source of faith and community resistance. Although I, like Romero, have come to see my particular field already in so many ways prepped to inherit the postsecular, the university as a whole may be as unprepared to accept faith and the supernatural as it is to accept Indigenous fields and ways of understanding.

The inability to move forward from a secular sundering, however, is not only difficult for the university, but it is also difficult for the church. What I find at issue here is not necessarily the allotment of religion to the private (although that is significant), but the disavowment of public learning into and within the hallowed spaces of the religious. I remember being a little confused when a microbiology graduate student concluded that the woman with the issue of blood had not been cured because she had depended on doctors of this world rather than on God. Similarly, I wrinkled my eyebrows while reading my students’ responses to evaluations of spirituality in my classroom. I was not disgruntled by low scores, but rather with a possibly simplified understanding of the spiritual that a religious institution may have inherited from modernity. I later bore my testimony about this moment, believing that, “We lose opportunities to come to know our savior when we don’t reflect on the less conspicuous moments in which he makes himself known to us.” My students miss out on spiritual experiences when they fail to realize that a lesson on embracing the opposition or the tedious task of being politically correct is simply a lesson on loving our brothers and sisters and meeting them where they are. I was then astounded when, the following semester, a student wrote, “The only time I felt the Spirit was when we talked about political correctness in persuasive writing and how vital a name is to God.” Maybe then the schism within which I taught and worshiped was less about interpreting through God, but the inability to search even the most “unlikely” places for his presence. All things denote there is a God,¹¹ and the church does not have a monopoly on the spiritual or in revealing the divine. To move into a postsecular state, a state that does not bind God, we must

allow our dual existence, our soul and our spirit or the supernatural and the material, or reason and intuition, to be rejoined into the oneness that God pleads for.

We are taught that oneness comes through covenant. My ancestors and parents instilled in me the vitality and essence of sacrifice and consecration in all aspects of my life. I believe a covenantal connection to my education allows God to be revealed to me in the halls of academia. This was cemented in my mind during the Yeshiva University President's forum at BYU. During the address, Ari Berman spoke of covenant versus consumer living, especially when it concerns education. Berman explicates, "In the consumer model, education is about utility; in the covenant model, it is about mystery."¹² Berman concludes that this mystery is an ongoing search for divine truth that leads students to live lives of faith and contribution. Gregory of Nyssa beautifully presents this covenantal commitment to truth in a nuptial metaphor:

The soul having gone out at the word of her Beloved, looks for Him but does not find Him.... In this way she is, in a certain sense, wounded and beaten because of the frustration of what she desires.... But the veil of her grief is removed when she learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on in her quest and never ceasing her ascent.... Thus the veil of her despair is torn away and the bride realizes that she will always discover more and more of the incomprehensible and un hoped for beauty of her spouse throughout all eternity.¹³

What a beautiful way to describe the relational connection we experience as we learn truth. I will admit that on a regular day, the marital relationship I experience within academia can look as unromantic as any other marriage. On any given day, a couple may not see beauty in their quest for love or in discovering mystery in the other but is more often caught up in the dreariness or repetitiveness of the mundane. Or perhaps they fail to find the mystery in the other and see fault and error instead. The moments, however, that I remember "the word of my Beloved" or the call to academia is when my veil of despair is torn away to glimpse the groom forever ascending before me. This is the reason why academia continues to satiate my desires. Without a search for godliness in my studies, I am lost, left to the drudgeries of mortal perspectives.

For example, the other week I told my mother for the fiftieth time that I was quitting academia, that I wasn't made for it, and that I would be happier elsewhere. She did not tell me to stay; instead, she asked me, "Have you accomplished the work you were sent there to do? Would you look back on this moment knowing that you had given it your all?" My mom recognizes and reminds me that like other religious promises I make in church, my education is covenantal: it is necessary to fill it with purpose, answer its callings, and sacrifice all my efforts as an offering to be sanctified by Christ. I think this is why my patriarchal blessing reminds me that education has been a vital aspect of my life that I will be blessed to continue. It especially emphasizes that as I pursue this blessing, I will learn more about my Savior.

At the center of this consecrated journey, we must have what other religious journeys entail: metanoia. Branch translates metanoia as a "change of heart and mind, the change of our *nous* (the center of our being)" meaning that we "turn away again and again in freedom from everything that is not life—deathliness, sin, violence—and the egocentrism that is at the root of it all, towards what is life and life-giving—love, care, and relationship with God and others."¹⁴ President Nelson has said that this transformation, a repentance of depth, is meant to change the very way we breathe.¹⁵ While it may be clearer to practice this as church-goers, how might we

practice this within the humanities? Branch bridges this gap as she finds that “the kind of empathy and sympathy that is cultivated by reading literature seems to me closely related [to] metanoia. Literature can and in fact, has been for many Christians ... a potent and even necessary part of the perpetual reorientation that God’s infinite love calls us towards.”¹⁶ I feel this in my very core. I expressed this when, after a long week of working with my friend at Disney’s College Program, we sat on the beach of a French resort looking at the sunset fall over the shadowed outline of the skyliner discussing, not the future of the humanities, but the future of our careers as English majors, a topic as easily grim for us at that moment. Holli wondered why she had ever chosen English, and as I thought about the comparison of this idyllic scene to the dripping dungeon in which I worked following four years of awarded undergraduate study, I was still able to say, “Holli, our major is eternal. Think about women’s careers over time. Think about the typist who got overrun by computers. We have learned to become like God, and that will never become outdated.”

Since that day, I have been transformed by the mysteries of God communicated through his prophets and the prophets of literature. As I read and explore the humanities I believe as C. S. Lewis has said that “in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.... Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”¹⁷ I transcend myself, feeling a portion of Christ’s atoning love, suffering with Him “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind ... that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people.”¹⁸ As I read about the pains, sicknesses, infirmities, and even joys of his children, I can feel Him with me, giving me understanding, helping me join hands with my sisters and brothers, waiting for the day that we will all, like the young feller aboard, rise up, up, up, beyond our reach to Him whose arms are stretched out still. As a scholar of faith, I have been caused to sing, “We are all God’s Children / Reaching out to Touch You / Reaching to the Sky.”¹⁹

¹ Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. A Harvest Book, 2005, pp. 27.

² Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience in the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 20-21

³ Lewis, *Religious Experience*, pp. 145-55.

⁴ Woolf, Virginia. *The Voyage Out*. A Harvest Book, 1920, pp. 227.

⁵ Taylor, Charles. “Introduction.” *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 1-22.

⁶ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, pp. 21.

⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, pp. 15.

⁸ Taylor, Charles. “Introduction.” *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2009, pp.8.

⁹ Branch, Lori. “Can Literature & Christianity Help Us Make Sense of Human Existence?” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Veritas Forum, 19 May 2024.

¹⁰ Chao Romero, Robert. *Brown Church*. InterVarsity Press, 2020, pp. 8.

¹¹ “Alma.” *The Book of Mormon*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015.

¹² Berman, Ari. “Covenant versus Consumer Education.” *BYU Speeches*, BYU, 31 Jan. 2024, speeches.byu.edu/talks/ari-berman/covenant-versus-consumer-education/.

¹³ *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*. Translated and edited by Herbert Musurillo, S.J. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961, pp. 45.

¹⁴ Branch, “Can Literature & Christianity” *YouTube*, 19 May 2024.

¹⁵ Nelson, Russell M. “We Can Do Better and Be Better.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 1 Apr. 2019, www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/04/36nelson?lang=eng.

¹⁶ Branch, “Can Literature & Christianity” *YouTube*, 19 May 2024.

¹⁷ Lewis, C.S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1961, pp. 141.

¹⁸ “Alma.” *The Book of Mormon*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015.

¹⁹ “Donnie McClurkin (Ft. Yolanda Adams) – The Prayer.” *Genius*, 2003, genius.com/Donnie-mcclurkin-the-prayer-lyrics.