

Wednesday February 5, 2014

## Much ado about nothing

Here's a brain-teaser for you – try to think of nothing.

You can't.

In fact, there is no such thing as nothing. Because if there was such a thing as nothing, it wouldn't be nothing, would it?

When the Big Bang happened, 14 billion years ago (give or take a few million years) it was not an explosion of something out into empty space. Rather, scientists say, it was an explosion of space itself. Beyond that bubble of expanding space, there was nothing to expand into.

The same with time. How long did nothing exist before something exploded into existence? It's a meaningless question, because there was no time, either. Nothing couldn't have been there forever, because it wasn't there at all.

We can imagine a vacuum, from which every molecule of anything has been pumped out. But we have to imagine that vacuum existing within some kind of a container.

So we persist in wondering about the boundaries of the universe. What contains it? Answer: nothing does. How far does that nothing go? It doesn't. Because going on forever implies both time and space. But if there's nothing there, there's no time, no space, no matter.

Just nothing.

## Beyond imagining

Our minds cannot imagine nothing. We can only imagine something.

That's why Anselm of Canterbury, a thousand years ago, defined God as a "being than which no greater can be conceived."

If we can imagine it, he argued, it can exist. Indeed, it must exist. Because, Anselm went on, we can't not-imagine such a being. If something can be conceived not to exist, then we have imagined something. Consequently, as a Wikipedia entry puts it, "a thing than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot be conceived to not exist and so it must exist."

Did you follow that?

I think Anselm was saying that because we can't imagine nothing, we have to imagine something. We call that something "God." He saw that as indisputable proof of God.

Sometimes, in my writing classes, I instruct students "Do not think of an elephant!" Of course, the first thing that pops into their minds is an elephant. My students giggle a little, and try to imagine something else. But that silly elephant keeps popping up.

Which is why strident atheism is self-destructive. You can't keep denying the existence of God (by whatever name) without inviting people to think about God.

I read about an atheist church in London, England. It had huge success its first year of operation. It offered the social benefits of a conventional congregation, without the dogma that many attendees rejected.

But soon it developed a liturgy. It wove music, words, and ritual into a predictable pattern.

And it didn't take long for it to set up a branch congregation in the U.S.

Who didn't take long to disagree with their parent church over what they didn't believe, and to split off into a new atheist church.

Just as you can't think of nothing, you can't believe in nothing. You have to believe in something. Even if it's not-God.

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## YOUR TURN

I had commented, in last week's column about the semi-naked woman who leaped onto the altar during Christmas Eve Mass at Cologne Cathedral, "Amazing, isn't it, that a pair of naked nipples can ruin a sanctuary more than high explosives?"

To which Ted Wilson asked the necessary question: "Would they be as offensive if they were male?"

Brian Ames noted, "You commented that the American media largely ignored the female protester ... If more of the media would refuse to comment on or publicize such ridiculous incidents we would not have the 'over the top' reporting that we are bombarded with daily. Honest reporting/journalism gets a bad rap from the sleazy sensationalism-seeking paparazzi that stoop to any lengths to acquire a headline."

James West thought there was a biblical precedent for desecrating altars -- "Isaiah in Jerusalem. What struck me most was that the worlds were in English instead of German. Sightings (U of Chicago School of Divinity) had a good article on this story.

"Still meditating on your closing question. Initial take, it's the main thing."

Isabel Gibson was also meditating on that question: "You ask whether it's OK to offend people to market a product but not a cause. It is absolutely OK to offend people, period. Not to hurt them. Not to discriminate against them. But to offend? Absolutely. We none of us have a right to insist that others respect our sensibilities.

"As for the abortion debate -- it's not much of a debate when some argue that it's murder, and others argue that it's all (only?) about social and legal equality for women. I am a woman and have been working for social equality since I was old enough to self-identify as a woman, and I still don't think that abortion is only about a woman's body. But if another woman wants to bare her breasts in a cathedral or in Bethlehem to draw attention to her opposing point of view, I don't object. I could wish, perhaps, for a more adult and productive conversation."

"The woman's claim that she is God might be a reasonable affirmation of the experience of mystical union in some traditions (e.g., Hinduism, Sufism)," Steve Roney wrote. "But a mystic would not do this on an altar in a cathedral, and Femen would not take credit on political grounds."

Don Snesrud wrote, "Your words of 'Gods Spirit in each and every one of us' summed up for me what you had written... To honour that spirit whether by knowledge, meditation, or acknowledging the good in another person is key for me. For God is Love and vice versa. Yes, I find the episode distasteful for those things you describe You've balanced that out and more by where that Holy One is.

"I too have a dark side which is judgemental of those described by you. I often wonder how to correct those things and if G-D is there? How can we be more just and instil respectful of one another?"

There were still some letters coming in from the previous week's article on toxic leadership.

David Gilchrist wrote, "When I read the bit about Toxic bosses, I remembered the great bosses I've had, and counted myself lucky. But today, reading the comments of others awoke some darker memory.

"The summer of 1951 I took a job as First Aider in a camp north of Sept. Isle, PQ, where the railroad was being built to Knob Lake, Labrador. The boss was a surly American of the worst kind. One day the workers reported that a truck had broken through a temporary bridge. When they told of the damage to that truck, but said they thought the driver would be okay, he exploded in fury saying something like: 'To hell with the man: there're lots more where he came from. You look after the machinery!'

"The driver was unconscious, and I very soon determined he would have to be flown out to the hospital. When I went to radio for the helicopter, the boss refused to let me do so, saying that it was MY job to look after the man, and he wasn't going to waste money on the chopper. As soon as he left the office, I put the call in. When I left to return to university that fall, I stopped to meet the staff at the hospital and ask after the man, and was reprimanded for not calling for help sooner. They found it hard to believe when I told them what had happened! I still do!"

And Rachel Pritchard added, "Your thoughts on toxic leadership makes me think of the leadership of parents: the damage and/or good they can (and do) do over a much longer period of time than most of us stay in a job, and

during what for most of us is a much more impressionable age. I guess most of us learn our leadership skills (or otherwise) at this first 'job' from our first 'leader'."

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

In the middle of a wearying winter, Psalm 112's assurance that all will be well, and all manner of things will be well, comes as a welcome note.

- 1 Those who trust God's wisdom,  
who are willing to learn God's ways,  
will never be ground down by the troubles they encounter.
- 2 They will be able to speak of their children with pride;  
they will receive respect from all.
- 3 Their influence will extend far beyond their own circles.
- 4 In trials and tribulations, God will give them help --  
but not before they require it,  
or they might rely on themselves instead of God.
- 5 In return, God expects them to share their skills and talents generously,  
to treat everyone fairly,  
to lighten the loads of sufferers.
- 6 Because they know who and what they are,  
their heads are not turned by every trend and fad.
- 7 They are not broken by bad news.
- 8 Misfortune does not destroy them,  
for they weigh their worth upon other scales.
- 9 Whatever they have, they use for the common good;  
When they die, they are remembered with gratitude.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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### YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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### TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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