

Atheist Alternatives

by Jeffrey Thomas

Many who believe in a god also believe that much of our traditions, values, and activities derive from that god, due to its being the origin of or a necessary referent for our culture.

“Atheist Alternatives” look at how a non-believer might approach such shared culture elements without the assumptions of belief. The essays do not argue against belief in a god; rather, they present alternatives to religious beliefs’ definitions of some traditions, imagery, material creations, and behaviors.

Swearing is a good place to start, don’t you think?

On Swearing

For an atheist, the trouble with profanity is that it validates, in a backhanded way, the existence of a deity the atheist doesn’t believe in. Crying out “Goddammit!” after whacking your thumb with a hammer implies that something called “God” exists (and has the power to damn things).

Christians obviously have no such problem with saying “Oh my God.” Making the one expletive into three sentences—“Oh. My. God.”—deepens the shock or outrage. The abbreviation OMG (or “O.M.G!”) is universally recognized in both textspeak and speakspeak. Christians who are particularly scrupulous about not swearing say “OMGosh!” as in, “O. M. Gosh. He didn’t!” I first heard this in *The Book of Mormon Musical*, and thought it a hilarious joke by the writers. When I later heard Christians say it for real, I was amazed, although on second thought I shouldn’t have been. It seems an essential quality of a deity that his, her, or its all-encompassing importance forbids uttering the deity’s name without due reverence.

However, “gosh” (or “golly” or any other blunting modification) doesn’t really fix the atheist’s problem. It reminds me of George Carlin’s great exposure of another euphemism: “You can’t fool me: ‘Shoot’ is ‘shit’ with two o’s!”

The atheist can’t really even burst out with “Jesus H. F**king Christ!” without conceding divine existence to “Jesus Christ”. You could argue that variations on “Jesus Christ” only acknowledge the existence of a historical person, but to choose Christ to use in swearing as opposed to, say, some forgotten actuary, is to credit Christ with being someone unique in history. Taking in vain the name of any other Tom, Dick, Harry, or Jane just doesn’t—assuming belief—have the same punch.

I have an alternative to offer: Make the subject of your swearing a generic non-existent deity. When the atheist says, “Oh, my non-existent deity!” she is affirming that the deity in question does not exist. Contract “non-existent deity” to “NED”, and you have an expletive that rolls off the tongue as easily as the standard object of swearing: same number of syllables (one), same ease of utterance. :Like “OMG!”, “OMNed!” may easily be rendered as three sentences.

In addition to not affirming the existences of beings you don’t think exist, swearing by a ned doesn’t offend Christians—unless, of course, they sniff a whiff of satire. But chances are they won’t. Besides keeping your speech congruent with your truth, taking a ned’s nonname in vain really does avoid one of their top ten sins.

If you want to try “ned,” here are some examples to help you get going:

“Oh, dear ned, that hat. What is it with the British?”

On one's first sip of coffee in the morning: "Ned, that's good." Second sip: "That is neddamn good!" (Okay, so you lose some alliteration in that one.)

To work around "heavenly days": "Nedly days, it's your wife!"

"You really want to invite my ex? Ned forfend!"

"Just imagine [name of political opponent here]'s actually getting elected President. Ned save us!"

To replace "holy god" or "holy christ": "Nedly ned! I hope he has a good lawyer!"

"My ned, sir! That is an unnedly outrage!" (Unfortunately, the sound of "n" doesn't really pack outrage's oral punch the way that of a good hard "g" does. The "g" backs up the outrage until it explodes outward, whereas the "n" just sounds like a battery-powered drill running out of juice.)

Could good fortune be "ned-sent"? For the atheist, there's as good a chance of that as of happy events being heaven-sent.

One drawback, of course, is that a non-existent deity is new and different: people could end up scratching their heads at inconvenient times. Let's say you're drowning. "Help!" you cry. "Save me! For ned's sake, save me!" Potential rescuers could spend precious time looking around for someone named Ned who has a vested interest in your rescue. Or, as you go down for the third time, they might ponder the theological implications of saving you for ned's sake rather than their god's. At your wake, sipping scotch by your casket, they'll say, "Such a tragedy! Too bad about his atheism. It's what killed him, you know. That 'For ned's sake' business confused us."