

PART II. ANGELS AND DEMONS AMONG US: THE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF HEAVEN AND HELL IN POPULAR CULTURE

*The Gospel According to Comic Strips: On Peanuts, The Far Side, and B.C.*¹

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God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! ... Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, §125

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition, 1989), the word “gospel” has its roots in Old English, and is the result of blending the two words for “good” and “story.” Traditional Christian doctrine teaches that there is only one “good story,” and that “good story” is a true story—the true story, as in the “gospel truth”—contained in the narratives related by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, about Jesus of Nazareth, “the way, the truth, and the life” through whom one may come to the Father (John 14:6). But what happens when the Truth becomes a truth? Is that still a good story?

This chapter examines changes in late twentieth-century American religion by tracking the transformation of the Gospel into a gospel—or rather, quite a few gospels—in popular culture, charting the movement of the religious impulse from traditional institutional religious expression into diffuse, non-traditional, non-institutional settings.

Come the Revolution

By the last third of the twentieth century, argued *Time* religion editor John Elson (1966), Nietzsche was no longer the “prophet” of only those few “skeptics for whom unbelief [was] the test of wisdom.” Instead, the questions Nietzsche asked — or more accurately, the position he averred — seemed much more pressing to a new generation of theologians— Christians and Jews— who were pondering not only the nature of the Divine, but also the Divine Presence’s very existence.

These “death of God” theologians, as they were known, created such a stir that by the spring of 1966, their concerns had made it to the cover of *Time* magazine. But the topic was of interest to more than just academics and theologians. According to *New York Times* writer William Grimes (2009), the April 1966 “Is God Dead?” issue of *Time* that carried Elson’s comments “caused an uproar, equaled only by John Lennon’s offhand remark, published in a magazine for teenagers a few months later, that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus.”² This first issue in *Time* history without a cover photograph or illustration — bearing only the infamous central question in “giant blood-red letters” — was the best selling one off the newsstands for the publication since the 1940s, and attracted the highest number of readers’ letters the magazine had seen up to that time. As Grimes rightly points out, this issue of *Time* “remains a signpost of the 1960s, testimony to the wrenching social changes transforming the United States.”³

But to borrow from humorist Mark Twain, reports of God’s demise were greatly exaggerated; nowhere in his article did Elson say that God was actually dead.⁴ The article that was at the center of the furor — the one around which this particular issue of *Time* was built — was rather innocently (and somewhat academically) titled “Theology Toward a Hidden God,” and focused less on a God that had died (or been killed) than on one that had become less relevant in the lives of contemporary Americans. Reflecting (more than the issue’s cover) post-Holocaust, non-Nietzschean trends in American theology, the article grappled with a world (or rather, an English-speaking American world) in which many seemed to live life without God — in which God was hidden from them (or by them) — in what Protestant theologian Harvey Cox (1965) called the “secular city.” Argued Gabriel Vahanian, one of the early voices in the movement (1967, 4), “there was a Christian era” in which “culture corresponded with its theology,” but currently “the world has been deprived of its sacramental significance; human existence has lost its transcendental dimension,” and the language did not “necessarily entail or presuppose communion.” Jewish philosopher Eugene Borowitz (1967, 93) agreed, noting that “Western culture and society are no longer Christian,” and the citizens of the

modern world were, “in all the effective levels of their lives, non-religious.” “Modern man,” he argued, “is secular and happily so.” Rather than from Twain, maybe the best line for the “death-of-God” theologians was to be borrowed from 1960s American folk singer Phil Ochs: God wasn’t dead, he was just missing in action (Ochs 1989, from the liner notes).

And yet, if the reaction to the *Time* cover is any indication, far from God’s death (or removal) being a preoccupation among American believers, the 1960s were halcyon days for thinking about God in the English-speaking world. The Second Vatican Council (“Vatican II,” 1962–1965) and the 1968 Medellin Conference (which the Vatican opposed) brought greater public attention to American Catholic theology, ritual, and practice, while the work of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and evangelist Billy Graham brought greater attention to Protestant spirituality and religious interpretation, and beyond. If the publication of a book is any indication of the public’s interest in its contents, then there is also a more mundane data set that suggests great spiritual activity during this period; according to the Library of Congress, in the 150 years from 1815 to 1965, 152 different versions of the canonical gospels were published, an annual average of just over one gospel per year (1.01), but in the 47 years from 1965 through September 2011 (during which time there were 98 copies of the same gospels published), the annual average doubled (2.09).⁵

Not counted among those gospels, but often credited with being on the vanguard of the 1960s revolution of religion and culture, was a small volume of a slightly different sort, written by a Presbyterian minister, suggesting that contrary to the “death-of-God” theologians, God and God’s message could actually be found among the most mundane of sources.⁶ Just before *Time* magazine posed its provocative question, Robert Short published *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, exploring the Christianity of the cartoon strip of the same name. Written “with the blessing of Peanuts creator Charles Schulz,” the work became a bestseller, and despite the observation from noted American church historian Martin Marty that “[a] lot of people were nervous about this idea of mixing popular culture and the Bible,” the volume eventually sold more than 10 million copies globally and has been translated into eleven different languages (Sanders 2009).⁷

The volume’s introduction was written by Nathan Scott, one of the founders of the field of religion and literature populated by scholars who, beginning in the mid-1950s, promoted the examination of literature through a theological lens. According to Jeffrey Mahan (2007, 48–49), Scott’s “germinal work drew our attention to the relationships between religion and art,” making him the perfect person to be associated with Short’s work “which used Charles Shultz’ [sic] Peanuts cartoons to invite a popular audience to reflect theologically.”⁸



Charlie Brown (left) speaks with Linus van Pelt in the snow. A *Charlie Brown Christmas* (Warner Bros.) has aired every Christmas since its prime-time television premiere in 1965. Based on Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strips, the cartoon has a notable religious message. Robert Short's *The Gospel According to Peanuts* was published the same year.

As a subject for Short's theological analysis, Schulz's work was an obvious choice. Schulz was a religious man — "a reasonable Midwestern student of the Bible" (Van Biema 1999) — and a member of the Church of God, where he taught Sunday school and "would occasionally deliver the Sunday sermon" (Boxer 2000). In an interview he had once described his "philosophy of life" by quoting a passage from the Gospel of Luke (17:2): "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones" (Boxer 2000).

Schulz was credited for taking the comic strip genre "to a new level, intellectually and spiritually" (Ahrens 1997). His characters were identified as "tiny contemplatives" who were "the embodiment of childlike faith" (Ahrens 1997) yet who "exist after the fall of man from the Garden of Eden," and who therefore portray childhood in all of its "Augustinian corruptness" (Berger 1976, 299). Snoopy in particular was identified as "a commentator from a mock-pulpit, calling man to see his errors and return to the straight and narrow path" (Berger 1976, 301), demonstrating to all, noted one scholar,

that “ultimately we are all free to create ourselves as we wish, no matter what our status on the Great Chain of Being might be. We can all be authentic if only we will have the courage to be what we can be” (Berger 1976, 303; emphasis deleted). This same scholar saw the strip as “little homilies and morality plays to help us maintain our righteousness,” and marveled at how Schulz was able to disguise an “ethical element in his work so beautifully that we seldom see it” (Berger 1976, 301). As theologian, Short was able to demonstrate that Schulz was “delivering parables for our time” (Burns 1985, 33); the religious elements of the strip, “written as moral instruction by artist Charles Schulz, were analyzed as scriptural literature” (Ahrens 1997). Concluded Short’s editor David Dobson, Short “really invented the study of religion through popular culture” (Sanders 2009).

But the gospel according to Short — and the lesson of locating the Truth in the mundane of everyday life — was less a cause of a revolution than a by-product of it.

The Revolution

Somewhere between Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr’s 1951 analysis of the five relationships of Christ to culture (“Christ and culture,” “the Christ of culture,” “Christ above culture,” “Christ and culture in paradox,” “Christ the transformer of culture”) and religion scholars Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan’s 2000 related analysis of religion to popular culture (“religion in popular culture,” “popular culture in religion,” “popular culture as religion,” and “religion and popular culture in dialogue”) lies the revolution of which Short’s *Gospel* is but an artifact.

As the “death-of-God” theologians rightly observed — and as Niebuhr’s construction unabashedly reveals — in the English-speaking world there had indeed been a Christian culture, or at least (in public) the façade of a Christian culture. Even in early American history — despite arguments from such historians as Jonathan Butler (1990) and Nathan Hatch (1989) that the populace was diverse, not particularly observant, and not traditionally pious — the public institutions (laws, public rhetoric, judicial pronouncements) were decidedly synchronized with a general yet recognizable form of Christianity (Handy 1984). Even as late as the second half of the nineteenth century, the most powerful perceived public threat was not that good American citizens (meaning white European Protestants) would become non-Protestant, but that those beyond the reach of “civilization” (everyone else) would be impossible to assimilate into American culture.⁹

A series of highly important religio-demographic turns during the nine-

teenth century — the so-called “Second Great Awakening” and the concomitant increase in Protestant denominationalism (1810s–1830s), increased Catholic and Jewish immigration (1840s and 1880s, respectively), and the fracturing of a great portion of Protestantism along “modernist”/“fundamentalist” lines (1890s–1900s) — meant that by World War I the façade was starting significantly to weaken (see Handy 1991). What has come to be called the “second disestablishment” — the beginning of the end of a public Protestant cultural monopoly — became more evident as more Catholic, Jews, and even non-mainstream Protestants began to play an increasingly public role in American society.

This weakening in the public sphere of a Protestant cultural monopoly coincided with — facilitated, actually (see Mazur 1999) — a strengthening in the authority of the federal government, enabling a utilitarian and politically expedient expansion in the notion of religious pluralism that better corresponded to the kind of religio-demographic diversity identified by historians of 19th century American religion. From the 1940s through the 1960s, the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the First Amendment’s “free exercise” clause expanded exponentially, leaving behind the arrogance of such 19th century dicta as the ruling identifying Mormon religious practices as “odious” (*Reynolds v. United States*, 1878), or the United States as a Christian nation (*Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 1892), and admitting that citizens might not only believe that which they could not prove (*United States v. Ballard*, 1944), but might also be required to act on those beliefs (*Sherbert v. Verner*, 1963) — a very non-traditional view for a majority Protestant Court that had traditionally privileged faith over works in its conceptualization of religion (Hammond et al. 2004, especially chapters 3 and 4). The Court’s interpretation of the First Amendment’s “no establishment” clause followed a similar path, and increasingly the state’s historic intimacy with institutional Protestantism was dismantled in the name of “benevolent neutrality.” A nation dominated numerically, culturally, and politically by various (but, by and large, mainstream) Protestant denominations since the British colonial period had, by the time of Catholic Senator John Kennedy’s election as President in 1960, entered what American religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom (1972) would call its “Post-Puritan” period.

By the time the American public was asked “Is God dead” or read Short’s *Gospel According to Peanuts*, it was in the midst of what Robert Wuthnow (1988) called the “restructuring of American religion” (from denominational to ideological foundations) and what Phillip Hammond (1992) labeled the “third disestablishment” (the liberation of the individual believer from an inherited religious identity). The rise of the post-World War II “baby boomer” generation (those born between 1948 and 1963), their perception of the failure

of traditional cultural institutions (government, religion) to adequately provide meaning — or worse, to endorse the wrong meaning — and the introduction of alternative meaning systems (which, as a result of the *Immigration Act of 1965*, included non-Western forms of religiosity), meant that religious institutions increasingly were on the defensive in American society, competing with each other and with new entrants into the market for the attention and loyalty of the up-and-coming generation. The new religious “consumers” — identified by Wade Clark Roof (1993) as a “generation of seekers” — increasingly identified themselves as “spiritual” (as opposed to — not in addition to — religious), and sought to express what once had been considered traditional religious energy in a variety of self-designated outlets.

One fear of the de-institutionalization of spirituality was that, as Borowitz (1967, 92) noted pejoratively, “theology threaten[ed] to become popular!” A new fear arose that the temptations of the modern world would lead Americans to be less religious, by which was meant less Protestant. Notes Stephen Warner (1993, 1046–1047), this fear was “rooted in a paradigm that conceived religion, like politics, to be a property of the whole society” wherein the separation of church and state — and the concomitant dilemma of expanded religious diversity — presented two options: religion as increasingly general so as to remain communal, or increasingly privatized and thus increasingly socially inconsequential. In either case, the fear was that the diminishment of the public role of a very specific religious identity (namely mainstream denominational Protestant Christianity) would lead to a secularized American public, a fear perceived by the “death-of-God” theologians as already taking place. In his analysis of the movement, sociologist and rabbi Will Herberg (1966a, 771) concluded that the death-of-God theologians’ argument was that “whatever meaning and relevance God may once have had, He has now lost this meaning and relevance for modern man.” He noted that modern man “may abandon Christian faith, and lose his Christian consciousness: but that only means that the spiritual void will be filled with a legion of modern idolatries, some of them almost too weird to describe” (Herberg 1966b, 840).

Some of the “legion of modern idolatries” were not quite as weird as Herberg feared, but were, to be sure, less than traditional in the Euro-American Protestant world. From the end of the 1960s into the 1970s, transformative works were being published in African American liberation theology (James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1969), Latin American liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 1973), feminist theology (Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father*, 1973), and Neo-Pagan theology (Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*, 1979). Works in eco- and gay theology would soon follow.

Transformations in Culture and the Explosion of “Gospels”

In a market-driven, competitive religious environment it is the “consumer” who—albeit influenced by the available choices—drives the development of alternatives by making “rational [or mostly rational] choices” according to her needs and desires. Stephen Warner (1993, 1057) argues that “what is important about religious markets ... is not so much the diversity of alternatives available to consumers as the incentive for suppliers to meet consumers’ needs”; as the “competition” between worldviews increased, so did the “market” for materials to meet the consumer demand. In the religious economy of the United States, this included those seeking historically traditional religious products as well as those seeking non-traditional, increasingly “spiritual” products (see Mazur and McCarthy 2010).

The proof is in the publishing. As described earlier, the rate of publishing the canonical gospels doubled after 1964; so too did the rate of publishing the non-canonical gospels¹⁰ and other biblically related gospels.¹¹ But the number of “gospels” published that were “popular”—that is, not canonical gospels, not those writings traditionally recognized as among the non-canonical gospels, and not biblically related interpretations of gospels—increased from six between 1815 and 1964 (or an average of 0.04 per year) to 79 between 1965 and 2011 (or an average of 1.68 per year)—an increase of nearly 1,217 percent.¹² Since 1954 the publisher that originally produced Short’s *Gospel*, John Knox Press—now merged with Westminster and officially affiliated with the Presbyterian movement in the United States—has produced 21 “gospels” (not counting three leader’s guides), 19 of which (over 90 percent) are “popular” gospels (according to the Beatles, Disney, Bob [Zimmerman] Dylan, Hollywood, Harry Potter, science fiction, the Simpsons, Bruce Springsteen, *Star Wars*, J.R.R. Tolkien, *Twilight*, U2, Oprah Winfrey, etc.) that, like Short’s *ur-Gospel*, investigate Christian themes, ideas, and lessons.¹³ Since 1965 (when Short’s *Gospel* was first released), the Press has published nearly a quarter (24 percent) of the popular “gospel” volumes available, and since its merger with Westminster (and particularly after the 2000 reissue of Short’s *Gospel* and the launch of an entire “gospel according to” series), it has published no new canonical gospels, at least none with a title beginning with the phrase “the gospel according to.”¹⁴

A similar pattern can be found in film. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com)—a standard resource for information related to movie production in the English-speaking world (if not globally)—of the fifteen English-language films that have been distributed in theaters (or gone directly to video) and have used the phrase “gospel according to” in their primary

title, none were produced before 1965, and none have been based on a canonical gospel. The closest candidates are the 1964 film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini)—which was originally released in Italy (*Il vangelo secondo Matteo*)—and the 1973 film *Godspell* (directed by David Greene), which nearly makes the list but was only subtitled *A Musical Based on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*. The remaining films include documentaries, comedies, and one drama; two portray the careers of gospel singers (and are accordingly titled *Gospel According to ...* rather than *The Gospel According to...*). As of early October 2011, two more “gospels”—a comedy and a documentary—were scheduled to be released in 2012.

But, argues Bible scholar Frank Burns (1985, 33–34), “the comic strip is the preeminent form of popular humor in America in the twentieth century,” and Schulz’s *Peanuts* (1950–2000) was not the only one to express some form of religiosity. Indeed, continues Burns, “[m]any major cartoon strips rely heavily on allusions to the Bible.” Bil Keane’s *The Family Circus* (1960–present) has occasionally presented religious images, symbols, and ideas, similar to *Peanuts* “in a sentimental, child’s-eye mode” (Van Biema 1999) but with a heavier treacle coating.¹⁵ Johnny Hart’s *B.C.* (1958–2007) expressed views that some considered “hard-core gospel” (Van Biema 1999) or “unabashedly evangelistic” (Weingarten 1999), but did so only around Christian holidays, and only beginning in 1989 when, after prolonged exposure to religious programming during the installation of his home’s satellite dish (in biblically named Nineveh, New York), he had a born-again experience and became a biblical literalist (Weingarten 1999). As a result of his desire to express this newfound religiosity in his strips, Hart on occasion had strips pulled from publication by newspaper editors who anticipated a strong negative public reaction to what some readers of differing religious perspectives might consider offensive (Price 2001).

But Schulz apparently never touched the third rail of cartooning. *Peanuts* “contains the most frequent and most consistent references to the Bible”—including Linus’s reading from the Gospel of Luke at the conclusion of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (TV, 1965)—and also was “the most consistent in presenting an affirmative view of life” (Burns 1985, 33), but strenuously avoided anything that might have been considered too sectarian. Lindsey and Heeren (1992, 74–75) conclude in their study of over 65,000 “entertainment” cartoons published in the *Los Angeles Times* during the late 1970s and early 1980s that “[t]he total exclusion of the latter two elements of the Trinity [Son and Holy Spirit] suggests that cartoonists wish to avoid touching matters of theological detail or sectarian differences,” possibly because they are both “more sacred and potentially more controversial as divine personages.” Use of the Bible, they note, “permits a kind of shorthand communication between

author and audience” that is fragile, and at great risk if exposed to too much specificity. As they conclude—likely more presciently than they may have realized—“Generic Christianity is preferred.”

While historians may argue that “generic” Christianity has been at the heart of American culture for most of its history, its scriptures have until recently avoided exploitation for mass marketing in the (visual) artistic world.¹⁶ But “[j]ust as the wise and witty sayings of the popular culture of Solomon’s kingdom found their way into the Bible as the collection called Proverbs,” concludes Burns (1985, 39), “the Bible has now contributed to the humorous elements of American popular culture.” Within the past twenty years there has been a significant increase in the number of comic Bibles published—Bibles depicted as comic (or graphic) art (see Meskin 2007, 372–373). Not illustrated Bibles, which have been published since the 1950s and are designed for use with children, these more recent publications (Siku’s *The Manga Bible*, 2008; Doug Mauss’s *The Action Bible*, 2010, etc.) fit the more traditional (if contested) definition of “sequential art” that depend on images (rather than words) to sustain the narrative (see Meskin 2007). Their appearance in recent years may be due to an increased receptivity on the part of the reading (or purchasing) public to engage sacred materials that are more—rather than less—ambiguous.

This ambiguity is amplified in a cartoon not only because of the diminished role of text, but because of the multiple interpretations available for the images. Scholar of religion and the arts. S. Brent Plate (2002, 57–58) has pointed out that “[i]mages are dangerous, out of control, linked to passions rather than reason, linked to the body rather than the mind, linked to the earthly rather than the heavenly”; those who have opposed them (“iconoclasts”) have done so for fear they could “incite religious devotion in ways not fully controllable and conformable to the institution of the church.” But, ironically, it may be the *lack of image*—what Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt (quoted in Meskin 2007, 371) call “the gutter” (the “perceptible space” between each picture)—that in cartoons is most subversive.¹⁷ These empty spaces encourage readers to deviate from orthodoxy and fill the gaps with their own imagination. In a culture where religious identity is more a matter of personal choice than ascription or coercion, the simple (and often overlooked) act of “filling in the blanks”—between cartoon frames as between other activities—can assume religious significance.

In 2008, Robert Short published *The Parables of Dr. Seuss* (a *Gospel According to Dr. Seuss* having already been published), but this time “without the cooperation of creator Theodore Seuss Geisel’s widow” (Sanders 2009). According to Short’s editor David Dobson, his real goal was to write a book that focused on Bill Watterson’s popular strip *Calvin & Hobbes*, but Watterson

refused to grant permission to use his materials.¹⁸ Said Dobson after Short's death, "he was heartbroken about it" (Sanders 2009).

On *The Far Side* of the Revolution

It is probably fair to say that, by the 1980s, the revolution had been waged. Evangelicals and conservative Christians had been "rediscovered" by the secular media, and were organizing behind various public figures, including Ronald Reagan, while an ironically labeled group ("Nones")—as in the response to "What is your religious preference?"—appeared with greater frequency in polling data illuminating American religious identities. A 2009 issue of *Newsweek* served as the journalistic bookend for the 1966 *Time* issue; the cover—using only words, formed in the shape of a cross—proclaimed "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." But this time, it was the article rather than the issue cover that bore the bad news; its headline declared "The End of Christian America" (Meacham 2009).

Robert Short's desire to explore *Calvin & Hobbes* for theological depth therefore was way off the mark—the real gospel truth for the era could best be found in Gary Larson's *The Far Side*, a single-frame cartoon published regularly from early 1980 until its abrupt end in 1994. During those fourteen years, *The Far Side* was one of the most popular cartoons in the United States. By 1988, Larson had published twelve *Far Side* collections, selling more than eleven million copies (Weiner 1988, 276). In combined licensing (mugs, cards, and particularly calendars), the franchise made over \$3 million annually, putting the artist "in the top ten of cartoon-related sales," behind *Peanuts*, but ahead of Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* (Weiner 1988, 276).

In many ways, Larson was the polar opposite of Schulz. Both felt a sense of fulfillment from their work. Schulz's friend Lynn Johnston, the creator of the cartoon strip *For Better or For Worse*, commented after his death that it was "'amazing that he dies just before his last strip is published.' Such an ending, she said, was 'as if he had written it that way,'" a point confirmed by Schulz's wife Jeannie, who noted that he had "done everything he wanted" (Boxer 2000). Larson, who abruptly quit drawing *The Far Side* in 1994, recently saw "every cartoon he ever syndicated" republished in a "giant, two-volume hardcover boxed set" of over 1,200 pages. "It's just a very cool thing for a cartoonist to have," commented Larson. "It's my death book. I can die now" (Stein 2003). But Schulz was immediately and easily identified as an illustrator for children, while Larson encountered some difficulty from "family newspapers" that "sometimes wouldn't run his gallows humor" (Stein 2003). While Schulz saw himself (and was described by others) as a cartoonist and as a religious person, Larson admitted that he wasn't really "into cartoons"

(Stein 2003); instead, he was identified as “the unofficial cartoonist laureate of the scientific community” (Miller 1989), the “madcap sage of the biological sciences” by biologist Edward O. Wilson (Gilmour 2010) and, by Harvard scientist Stephen Jay Gould (1988), as “our national humorist of natural history.” His work has been displayed (in a show titled “The Far Side of Science”) at the museum of the California Academy of Science (in San Francisco), the Smithsonian Institution (in Washington, D.C.), the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, and the American Museum of Natural History (in New York). Larson’s “surreal, pothead-meets-scientist take on humans’ overestimation of their species,” concludes one journalist, “made cartoons cool” (Stein 2003).

Originally titled *Nature’s Way* (Higdon 1994, 49), *The Far Side*’s penchant for science is easily misinterpreted as an anti-religious trope rather than as a reflection of the culture and the time in which it was created. Michael Gilmour (2010), who suggests that “the extent of ... biblical and religious-themed content in Larson’s work might surprise casual readers,” posits the power of Larson’s humor on “unanticipated turns of phrase and shifts away from the usual rhythms of religious narrative,” and concludes that his “religious-themed cartoons are playful, not theological statements with any agenda attached.” Citing Steve Martin’s foreword in *The Complete Far Side*—which lampoons religious scholarship and theological inquiry—Gilmour writes (with tongue in cheek): “Clearly, we need more theological analysis of *The Far Side*. (Or is it less?)”

The correct answer is “more,” but only if the study of *The Far Side* is not theological, but historical and contextual. David Higdon (1994, 54–55), using broader religious terminology, argues that Larson’s regular use of the filmic version of the Frankenstein narrative serves as a form of “authorizing myth” for *The Far Side*. Analyzing fourteen volumes of collected *Far Side* cartoons that were published between 1982 and 1992, Higdon identifies 139 panels that “have clear intertextual ties with particular films, and some 27 cartoons comment on the act of watching films” (49). Based on two quotes from Larson concerning his approach to drawing (“I don’t resort to current events or other stimuli. I don’t read or watch TV to get ideas. My work is basically sitting down at the drawing table and getting silly” and “A strange juxtaposing of things takes place that I don’t understand. It just happens”). Higdon concludes that “Larson has adopted the role of Frankenstein the creator, the power capable of generating an alternative world to our own and, by his own admission, Larson stands in awe of this power...” (54, internal referenced omitted).

Higdon takes Larson at his word, and thereby fails to locate him or his use of the Frankenstein narrative within the context of contemporary issues in American religion that may not have been on TV, but certainly would have

been in the atmosphere enough to have an impact.¹⁹ In one particularly pointed passage, Higdon describes a specific Larson cartoon (published on September 11, 1987; see Larson 2003, ii:88) in which a young Frankenstein is “remaining after class one day to write repeatedly on the chalkboard as punishment, ‘I will not play in God’s domain’” (51). Of course, Frankenstein *had* been playing in “God’s domain” by creating life, the very point of the subtitle of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel (*The Modern Prometheus*). Prometheus not only gave humans the gift of fire, but (in some versions of the legend) is also credited with their creation. Frankenstein is being punished because he *has* played in God’s domain. But in a culture where the traditional Christian God no longer enjoys a monopoly, he is (a) God — or at least could be. Despite Higdon’s assertion, Larson has not only provided evidence of an interest in the Frankenstein narrative, or more broadly in film or science, but has (maybe unknowingly) reflected the religious and theological ethos of his own time.

To measure this reflection, one need only survey the vast collection of Larson cartoons (Gilmour [2010] calls them “Lartoons”) published from 1980 to 1994. Of the 4,337 panels in the collection, 233 (or just under 5.5 percent) address religion in some way.²⁰ By comparison, Lindsey and Heeren’s 1992 study of religion in newspaper comics identified 365 (or just over 0.5 percent) that addressed religion in some way.²¹ Not only is Larson’s work eleven times more “religious” than the *Los Angeles Times* sample, it is also religious in a particular way. There is no doubt that images drawn from Christianity can be found in relative abundance; 58 percent of the panels contain images from the Old and New Testaments, extra-biblical figures like Santa Claus, Crusaders, and figures praying or teaching “Bible” lessons, and one “Jesus fish.” The remaining 42 percent of the panels do not. Like the United States, there is extraordinary diversity within this non-Christian 42 percent, with representation from various religious traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Greco-Roman and Norse religions, Hinduism, Islam, native traditions, Scientology, Spiritualism, Voodoo, and Wicca) and the world of spirits and the “undead” (genies, skeletons, ghosts, mummies, and zombies). Excluding representations of God, Old Testament images (Eden, Noah, Moses, Samson, and Jonah) outnumber New Testament images (Jesus and the Magi), 9 percent to 1 percent.

The context of the images suggests an abandonment of the traditional “generic Christianity” found in the older generation of cartoonists like Schultz and Keane — who was reported to have been fond of Larson’s work (see Myers 2011) — in favor of a broader notion of “spirituality” common in late 20th century American culture (see Wuthnow 1998). Representations of Hell (over 23 percent) outnumber all other religious panels, ahead of representations of native religious traditions (nearly 12 percent), and ghosts (nearly 8 percent). Dogs, chickens, and slugs pray, cows preach their religion door-to-door, and

the “Jesus fish” on the rear bumper of a flying saucer has three “googly” eyes. Larson’s irreverence — “Anything that’s set up to be very serious has comic potential when it all comes unraveled” (Miller 1989) — seems to be a perfect match for an era populated by those who were disillusioned by the perceived weakness of social institutions like religion and yet empowered to find their own paths in the variety of options available to them.

Conclusions

“I am become death,” J. Robert Oppenheimer recalled thinking as the first atomic fireball lit the sky over New Mexico in the summer of 1945, “the destroyer of worlds.” Oppenheimer, often called the “father of the atomic bomb” for his role in the Manhattan Project during World War II, was able to quote Lord Krishna because of a life-long fascination with the Bhagavad-Gita, a foundational Hindu text. Born into a Jewish family that was heavily involved in Felix Adler’s Society for Ethical Culture, he had early in his life begun a search for a deeper sense of the mystical, the transcendent — a “more profound approach” (Hijiya 2000, 129).

In many ways, Oppenheimer well represents the changes that took place in American culture in the second half of the twentieth century; it is telling that, while he may have actually thought these words from the Bhagavad-Gita at the exact moment of the atomic blast, he is on record no earlier than 1965 as having done so (Hijiya 2000, 123). What happened in those intervening twenty years?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the roots of the word “heresy” in the Greek word for “choice,” and by the late 1960s there was a growing list of choices throughout the American religious landscape. Will Herberg (1966c, 884) noted that “for heresy to mean anything, there must be orthodoxy, a firm and self-confident orthodoxy, as there is not today...” But maybe that was the heresy — that after so many centuries of Euro-Christian cultural dominance, individual Americans were increasingly moving to the music of their own god’s creation. Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray — who had been so influential in assisting the participants at the Second Vatican Council to take a more ecumenical approach to non-Catholics — identified the period’s unbelief not as refusal to believe in God, or even to question or doubt the existence of nature of the Divine, but as “the atheism of distraction,” in which people were “just too damn busy to worry about God at all” (Elson 1966, 82). Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (1986) came to the same conclusion when he suggested that “the opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference.”

But they aren’t indifferent, really. They may be disinterested in religious

institutions, but they are happily pursuing their own religious knowledge in what Robert Bellah and associates (1985) label “Sheilaism” (named for one of the many people interviewed for their study). Newspapers have been replaced by the Internet, and Snoopy, the “commentator from a mock-pulpit, calling man to see his errors and return to the straight and narrow path” (Berger 1976, 301), has been replaced in the public’s imagination by Brian Griffin, the pseudo-urbane alcoholic atheist dog on the animated television show *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-present). “In its suspicion and rejection of singular meta-narratives,” writes Mike Grimshaw (2010, 153), “postmodern spirituality turns toward a salvific, redemptive use of pop culture — often against traditional religion and its claims and institutions. Spirituality is therefore a commodity of possibilities for individuals to make use of as they can.” Thus “the death of God,” he continues, “is the creation of hope and new possibility, not the end of meaning.” Lindsey and Heeren’s argument about cartoons (1992, 76) is equally valid for the broader world of “gospel” proliferation: “religion as a spiritual framework and moral compass still appears to be significant, but it may not be religion in the same forms it has had in centuries past.”

Amen.

Notes

1. The working title of this essay was “The Gospel According to *The Gospel According to...* From ‘Is God Dead?’ to ‘What If God Was One of Us,’ Literally, in 30 Years.” I would like to thank Nichelle Mack and Arianne Avery at the Henry Clay Hofheimer II Library for their assistance securing materials. Research support was graciously provided by the Batten Professor Fund at Virginia Wesleyan College; thanks to Midge Zimmerman for not laughing when I requested *The Complete Far Side* for my “research.” Special thanks to longtime collaborator Kate McCarthy, who once paid me the highest compliment possible to a sociologist by saying I had a “tin ear” for theology.

2. Originally published in the March 4, 1966, edition of the *London Evening Standard*—one full month before this particular issue of *Time* hit the stands—the interview conducted by Beatles’ friend Maureen Cleave was propelled into the limelight when it was republished in August, 1966, in *Datebook*, an American fan magazine (see Spangler n.d.).

3. In 2008, the *Los Angeles Times* identified the *Time* issue as one of the “Magazine Covers that Shook the World” (“Magazine Covers” 2008), the oldest of those so identified.

4. Contrary to Elton John, neither did the *New York Times*.

5. Search was conducted on September 21, 2011, using the Library of Congress online database (<http://catalog.loc.gov>). Statistics are based on a title search (“Title Begins: gospel according”) and was structured to mirror the title of Short’s *Gospel According to the Peanuts* (see note 14, below).

6. Religion scholar Jeffrey Mahan (2007, 49) identifies it as one of two “precursors to the wider scholarly conversation about religion and popular culture.”

7. One reviewer concluded that, while Short’s volume was worth reading, he had found “just too much” in the cartoon, and was not actually “exegeting the gospel according to Peanuts” (Hakes 1965).

8. The introduction to the first Italian edition was written by novelist and professor of semiotics Umberto Eco (Boxer 2000).

9. See Mazur (1999) for an account of efforts to “Americanize” Native Americans.

10. Between 1815 and 1964, three gospels according to the Hebrews were published; between 1965 and 2011, 11 gospels according to Thomas (3), Philip (1), Judas (2), Mary (4), and Barnabbas (1) were published, an increase of 267 percent.

11. Between 1815 and 1964, 13 gospels according to Paul (3), Jesus (3), Moses (3), and one each according to James, Isaiah, Revelation, and “scripture” were published; between 1965 and 2011, 34 different gospels were published, according to Paul (6), Jesus (7), Job (2), Genesis (2), as “sermons” (5), and one each according to Abraham, angels, apostles, Aurelius, Barabbas, Elijah/Elisha, Esther, Isaac/Jacob, Jonah, Moses, Pilate, and Rome, an increase of 162 percent.

12. A quick check of titles starting with “The Tao of” (and “The Dao of”) and “Zen and the Art of” produced similar patterns. According to the Library of Congress online database, no titles starting with either of the phrases was published before 1956, and between 1956 and 1973, only four volumes using the phrase “the Tao of” were published (a publishing average of 0.235 per year); three of those were English translations of ancient Taoist texts. The pattern following the 1974 publication of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and the 1975 publication of Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics* parallels the 1965 publication of Short’s *Gospel*; between 1974 and October 28, 2011 (when the search was conducted), 280 titles using one of the two phrases were published, an average of 7.37 per year. (Thanks to colleague Paul Rasor for suggesting this comparison.)

13. While most of the titles produced by Westminster John Knox have kept to a religious (if broad and general) mission, competing titles have not. A good number of them — gospels according to [comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s character] Ali G., the Harvard Business School, the *New York Times*, Ayn Rand, and Casey Stengel, to name a few — are primarily monographs espousing the “truth” revealed in (or according to) the central subject.

14. Audio and video recordings, fiction (novels and dramas), duplications, and “leader’s guides” were omitted. The search strategy automatically eliminated volumes whose subtitle included the desired phrase (including *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers*, by Cathleen Falsani, 2009, Zondervan) and titles not of a parallel construction (including Robert Short’s *The Gospel from Outer Space*, 1983, Harper Collins). A few titles available for purchase (on Amazon.com) had no record on the Library of Congress database (including James Geiger’s *The Gospel According to Relativity*, 2005, Xulon Press). The observation that none of the automatically omitted titles was published before 1965 is intriguing but possibly coincidental. Alternative search strategies yielded the following: “Title Begins: gospel of” (891 records); “Title Begins: gospel” (4,185 records); “Title Keyword: gospel” (10,000+ records); “Title Keyword: gospel, of” (8,033 records); “Title Keyword: gospel, according” (966 records); “Keyword: gospel” (10,000+ records); “Keyword: gospel, of” (10,000+ records); “Keyword: gospel, according” (1,056 records).

15. Bil Keane died on November 9, 2011, as this chapter was being written. According to his obituary (Myers 2011), his son Jeff had taken over the strip’s production in recent years.

16. The history of Protestantism is the history of Bible publication for mass markets, and there has been a recent effort within the Bible-publishing world to produce “niche” Bibles for specific markets (“New Adventures” 2008). It is curious to note that graphic Bibles came to prominence after the decline of the topically unrelated but ironically named “Tijuana Bibles” of the 1920s–1950s (see Heller 2004).

17. In a close parallel, there is a rabbinic interpretation that suggests that, since the Torah cannot be fully understood by humanity, those engaged in Talmudic interpretation must read not only the letters on the page, but the white spaces between them, too.

18. According to the licensing representative for *Calvin & Hobbes* distributor Andrews McMeel Universal, the strip “has never done any official licensing”; the various popular images of Calvin — kneeling in prayer or urinating on corporate logos — are both (equal) violations of copyright law (personal communication, October 26, 2011).

19. A review of *The Complete Far Side* reveals a number of panels directly related to news of the day.

20. Evaluations of this sort are inherently subjective, and are offered here merely to illustrate a point. Panels were judged based on references to specific religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.), religious figures (deities, mythic/scriptural figures, clergy, etc.), religious symbols, images, or references (heaven, hell, Eden, crucifixion, etc.), religious acts (prayer), religious teachings (repentance), and the paranormal (ghosts, zombies, mummies, etc.). The number of panels quoted is Larson’s own admission — no independent count was made. Spread over two volumes on over 1,300 pages — most with three or four panels per page — the count seems reliable.

21. The 365 cartoons identified by Lindsey and Heeren were distributed according to the following categories: “ministering religion” (22.5 percent); “death and afterlife” (19.7 percent); “reli-

gion and the world of adults" (17 percent); "religion and the world of children" (15.6 percent); "prayer" (9.3 percent); "deity" (8.8 percent); and "biblical texts and contexts" (7.1 percent).

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