



Fall 1988

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### Recommended Citation

Galgan, Gerald J. (1988) "The Changing of the Gods," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol9/iss1/3>

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# The Changing of the Gods

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This paper was first delivered as part of a Symposium at Sacred Heart University on "The Catholic Tradition: The Rocky Road to Modernity," held on March 25, 1988.

GERALD J. GALGAN

*The Changing of the Gods\**

At the dawn of philosophy, Thales marveled or, perhaps, despaired: "All things are full of gods." Today, we are living through the final phase of the centuries-long "changing of the gods": technology has superseded philosophy; men are playing gods in place of gods acting as men. My remarks will fall into three areas: first, ancient philosophy, that is, the bearing of the pagan gods on the birth of philosophy; second, the development of modern philosophy out of medieval theological categories, that is, the bearing of the Christian God on the birth of modern science; third, by way of conclusion, our contemporary situation, that is, our "problematic" status as "gods without God."

*The Ancient Gods and the Birth of Philosophy*

Ancient philosophy began with myth, never entirely losing sight of nor completely negating this pre-philosophical mode. Stripping the events occurring in the world of their "becoming" and relocating them in a supra-temporal framework of universal paradigms and not singular facts, myth proposes a petrified and sacred "past" which can be reenacted by virtue of the "secret" knowledge of paradigmatic events which is imparted to the human race by the race of the gods. The sacred — which suspends rectilinear time in its ordinariness and profaneness — exists as a space determined by self-contained being which is at rest, over against the profane as a degradation of being, determined by a becoming which is outside of itself. The form of man which is mortal in the human race is deathless in the race of gods, thus paradoxically assuring the separateness of the two races: the gods proceed from "on high," but they are in function of sacred places and are not all-powerful within nature.

Here we have the germ of Aristotle's philosophical notion of the "primary differentiation of place" in terms of the "above and the

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below” — the imperfection of change residing in the lower precincts of the cosmos, in its terrestrial center.<sup>1</sup> Here also is the seed of the bifurcation in the Ptolemaic astronomy of the uppermost, heavenly, bright points of light and the lowermost, non-luminous sphere of mud and rock which is the earth. The unity of the cosmos is spatially articulated and circumscribed, cosmic order manifesting itself in a series of planes, and its unity filtering downward, with a concomitant loss of perfection, to the particular things governed by profane, rectilinear or directional time on earth. Circular motion, epitomized in the stars, is a tribute paid to the perfection of rest, and the outermost sphere of the cosmos, wherein is found “the seat of all that is divine,” is a revolving of that which is itself actually at rest.<sup>2</sup>

This closed, finished, eternal cosmos, a kind of “steady-state” universe, is the sum-total of being — what Parmenides called the “all-limited.”<sup>3</sup> The epistemological primacy is given to *what* is known, never to the knower, and although there is nothing above reason there are particular things beneath the dignity of reason, such as hair, bones, and clumps of earth. Against the irreducible, irrational power of fate, which is untouched by reason although it possesses no power over reason, not even the wills of the gods can prevail, and even they must struggle and suffer. The gods, after all, represent neither infinity nor omnipotence, and since the infinite can never be an actual thing,<sup>4</sup> there can be no infinite aspirations for culture, no programmatic attempt to conquer contingent matter.

The nature of man is to bespeak the finite essences of nature: to be anything less is to be a beast, to be anything more is to be a god. To construe man as “the measure of all things” is to negate the very possibility of philosophy as a properly human activity with a more-than-human purpose. As that which is imitated, nature is the repository of intelligibility, the home of form, and no mere code of other-than-natural meanings to be deciphered. Not even the race of gods can interfere from outside with the course of nature, and this holds as truly at the mythic beginning as at the philosophical twilight of ancient culture; for although the world becomes for Stoicism a *Cosmopolis*, it is a city inhabited in common by two races, gods and men, which are separated but which require each other’s existence.<sup>5</sup>

*The Christian God and the Birth of Modern Science*

The God whose viewpoint is exhibited in Christian faith shows himself to himself: trinity of persons is the same as one-ness of essence, so that God as Father generates the Divine Son and shares the same nature with his absolutely singular Word. As Creator, however, he wills a multiplicity of words, a world-book which is not of "one substance" with its speaker; what is created is completely other than God, and there is nothing divine about the world. To think Creation *ex nihilo*, some kind of paradigm is needed where there is complete dependence of the effect on the cause, and complete independence of the cause in relation to the effect — a virtually context-less causality where cause and effect are entirely different orders of being. Thus God is beyond all substance for Anselm,<sup>6</sup> not in any genus for Aquinas,<sup>7</sup> and is an actual singular for Duns Scotus.<sup>8</sup> Whereas pagan divinity must be *with* things that are not divine, God, for Christian belief, would exist in undiminished plenitude even had there been no world created; this is the God who is not merely separated from non-divine things in the world but is completely other than the world itself.

The bridging of the infinite distance between God and man, which maintains the difference between Creator and creature, is the life of Christ, which is a mixture of everyday, profane becoming and the most sublime tragedy, and which overcomes the ancient dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. Humanity can now assume a significance completely apart from any relation to a supra-human race of gods. Instead of the Stoic notion of the world as a city occupied by two races, gods and men, what is called for is two radically different cities, one supranaturally, and the other naturally, founded. The city of God and the city of man thus come to occupy the place once held by the race of gods and the race of men, and philosophy can now be informed by the conviction that created being has a direction, nay, *is* a temporal direction, and that its Creator is capable of becoming a creature without losing his uncreated Being.

The world can now be seen to have not only a contingency of "existence," in the sense that God need not have made a world at all, but also a contingency of "nature," in the sense that God need not have made the particular world which he made. The Creator-God comes to be thought of as freely binding himself by Covenant to

uphold the particular world he has willed to create, so that a very un-Greek emphasis can now be put on the inherent singularity of the world, transformed from a realm that is full of gods to a realm of imposed lawfulness — no mere spatial totality, but rather the relation between states of a spatial whole at different times. This unfinished, created universe, the unity of which is not yet fully experienced, having been likened to a book, can now be metaphorized as a machine, and with this we have the emergence of modern science which assumes that matter can have a real being apart from form and that the universe is a realm of laws of matter in motion. Devoid of absolutely privileged upward and downward places, the universe first proposed by Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo is non-hierarchical, with a homogeneity of material and process throughout — a universe where creative activity, both God and man's, is focused on the particular thing as its *terminus ad quem*.

The lowliest life, even for a sceptic like Montaigne, houses the whole of things human,<sup>9</sup> rooted as that particular life is, not in privileged space, but in the maintenance of unity in opposition through time. And this is possible because the very hairs on one's head are numbered by God,<sup>10</sup> or, as Leibniz says, because "individuality involves infinity."<sup>11</sup> When the logic of an incarnated infinite measure is taken out of a purely theological framework and applied to physical science, the race can be designated, as Descartes suggests, as the "masters and possessors of nature."<sup>12</sup> Man is now seen to transcend nature, by virtue of his having "a man's measure, that is, an angel's,"<sup>13</sup> and human cognition now comes to be conceived in the way that medieval theology conceived angelic cognition. Yet, by virtue of his "extended" or "material" being, man remains subject to the "laws" of nature. There thus emerges the modern dualism of mind and matter, of the inside and outside of consciousness, which supersedes the ancient mythic and philosophical dualism of the upward and the downward in cosmic space. This supersession is made possible by the medieval theological valorization of rectilinear temporality in which the temporal "after" can be seen to be a "making outward" of the intelligibility that was "inward" in the temporal "before."

The assumption is now that nature, as a code of other-than-natural meanings to be deciphered, has to be modified by the investigator in order to be genuinely known, so that physical things

## 18 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

themselves are thought to come under the influence of the human individual and no longer to operate as they would without that individual. What can be realized by the individual's own power is now central, that is, a selfhood which, as first presented by Rousseau, is not experienced except through itself.<sup>14</sup> This further suggests a notion of theory which no longer relates to the resting place of a contemplative onlooker but to the work-place of the human subject's exertion and production. Human subjectivity can now be seen to modify the sheer externality of space and time, and what is now at issue is not the love of wisdom, not the speech of *philo-sophia*, but the "logos" given to "technique," that is, technology. The displacement of the primacy of philosophy by the primacy of technology is rooted in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment's proclamation of limitless possibilities for the perfectibility of a human individuality which is seen to be the locus of the intelligibility of nature itself.

Thus the human race, in the late modern world, comes to be conceived as a mortal race of gods, the creator of its own tactics of living,<sup>15</sup> in sharp contrast to the ancient world where the race of immortal gods both hides from and discloses to men the means of life. Man as creator makes sense in terms of a co-creatorship with God, as Augustine himself suggested when he said that men "could be masters of this world if they were willing to be the sons of God."<sup>16</sup> In this way, even when modern thought "conceives itself as in the sharpest possible contradiction to its theological prehistory," as Hans Blumenberg remarks in his recent study of modern philosophy, "it is bound to the frame of reference of what it renounces."<sup>17</sup> There is a sense in which late modern culture, as Heidegger puts it, remains "Christian even when it loses its [Christian] faith."<sup>18</sup>

### *Gods Without God*

The problematic aspect of the changing of the gods may not lie, then, in any purported inconsistency of modernity with Christianity. It may, instead, lie in the attempt of late cultural modernity to remove all Greek or Hellenic elements from itself. In this way, the essentially problematic aspect of the completion of the changing of the gods may lie in the essential powerlessness of late modern thought to know its own essence as modern and the ground of that essence. The decline of speculative philosophy, more particularly the decline of an integral

sense of the contemplative, as the most significant element of our Hellenic heritage, may be the most significant loss confronting us in the midst of all that we have gained in modernity. The problem with the changing of the gods, the loss involved in modernity, may very well be the loss of the will to understand the more-than-modern conditions of modernity.

The sign of this loss may be the contemporary epistemological tendency to construe knowledge as that which is only *instrumental* for further knowledge. It is exclusively within the edifice of knowledge as *praxis* that the sign is to perform its signifying function, and the differing vantage points of interpretation are no longer held to look out upon a world which is common to all perspectives. There are, in other words, for the young and compassionate human gods, as many "cities" as there are interpretive vantage points, and these cities do not communicate. In this way, deprived of an intellectual center with which to unify a constantly increasing body of data, we find, as Cassirer has suggested, that our interpretive efforts tend to hide an understanding of the meaning of human being more than they disclose it.<sup>19</sup> What is at issue is no longer the *contemplative* "imperial *intellect*," as Cardinal Newman called it, but rather the *productive* "autocratic *ego*" constituted by endless consumption of disposable things in a "time scarce" society. Even knowledge has come to be construed as disposable and as a commodity — the knowledge industry, the movement of information, the processing of words.

Given this view, *Theoria*, with its claim to truth, is effectively reduced to a species of technology. Truth is now to be understood as a system of procedures for the production, operation, and circulation of propositions which are purely instrumental. Trapped in an epistemic circle where signs can only promote the comprehension of further signs, and where the whole circle is reducible no longer merely to the early modern, Baconian assertion that "knowledge is power," but to the late modern contention that "power is knowledge," the will to search for the ground of being is in danger of being entirely lost.

The contemporary human race of gods, I submit, is without an awareness of the importance of the search for the ground, without an awareness of the primacy of foundational discourse, to the extent that it has lost sight of the contemplative element in that conjunction

## 20 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

of the productive and the contemplative that western Christianity proposed. "But you will have gathered," Nietzsche admitted, "what I am driving at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests — that even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that *truth is divine*."<sup>20</sup>

The conjunction of ancient philosophy and Christian faith here, for all their differences, is highly significant. Each provided a metaphysics, each addressed a divine or more-than-human end for philosophy as a human activity. And if men who have changed into gods are to examine their essence, its limits, and its ground, then the conjunction and the differences will have to be drawn into the forum of speculative philosophy, emergent once again after its eclipse in the shadow of new gods.

Is it not written in your law, "I said, you are gods?"<sup>21</sup>  
And yet "the Lord your God is God of gods and  
Lord of lords . . . ."<sup>22</sup>

The truly problematic aspect of the changing of the gods is the failure to think through the implications of "modern philosophy's developmental incorporation of originally theological categories"<sup>23</sup> — the late modern forgetfulness of the ground, of the sense in which truth is divine. The new gods pursue truth but only as if it were functional, instrumental, not as having its matrix in the God of their own godhood.<sup>24</sup> "The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away," Brother William says, near the close of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.<sup>25</sup> Without a more-than-instrumental conception of truth, the new gods are without God, without the "God of glory,"<sup>26</sup> of whom our medieval tradition spoke.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *De Generatione et Corruptione*, trans. H. H. Joachim, in Vol. II of *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), Bk. I, 323a, 8; Bk. II, 335a, 25.

GERALD J. GALGAN

21

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, *De Caelo*, trans. J.L. Stocks, in Vol. II of *The Works of Aristotle*, Bk. I, 278b, 14-15.

<sup>3</sup>See Martin Foss, *The Idea of Perfection in the Western World* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, *Physica*, trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, in Vol. II of *The Works of Aristotle*, Bk. III, 204a, 9, 20.

<sup>5</sup>See Andre-Jean Festugière, O.P., *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup>St. Anselm, *Monologion*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946), Vol. I, ch. xxvi, p. 44, lines 4-5.

<sup>7</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pars Prima, Qu. 3, art. 5, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), Vol. I, pp. 31-32.

<sup>8</sup>See James Mensch, "Between Plato and Descartes — The Mediaeval Transformation in Ontological Status of the Ideas," *St. John's Review*, St. John's College, Annapolis, Md., (Spring 1984), p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 296.

<sup>10</sup>See Matthew 10:30.

<sup>11</sup>G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), Bk. III, ch. iii, # 289.

<sup>12</sup>René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, VI, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), Vol. I, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup>Revelation 21:17 (Revised Standard Version).

<sup>14</sup>Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions: A Reply to St. Augustine* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 152.

<sup>15</sup>Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 30.

<sup>16</sup>St. Augustine, *Of True Religion*, trans. J.H.S. Burleigh (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1959), xxxv, 65, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup>Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), p. 69.

<sup>18</sup>Martin Heidegger, "Metaphysics as History of Being," in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup>Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 21-22.

<sup>20</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), #344, p. 283.

22 SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY REVIEW

<sup>21</sup>John 10:34 (Revised Standard Version).

<sup>22</sup>Deuteronomy 10:17 (Revised Standard Version).

<sup>23</sup>Gerald J. Galgan, *The Logic of Modernity* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1982), p. xiv.

<sup>24</sup>See Gerald J. Galgan, "The Compassionate Gods of Technology," *Cross Currents*, 36, No. 2 (Summer 1986), pp. 204-218.

<sup>25</sup>Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 492.

<sup>26</sup>See Eco, p. 501.