

The Gaeia Manchester Sermon 2014:
The Church of the Funnies

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The Church of the Funnies

I am an inappropriate person to be giving a sermon. I have spent thirty-six years of my life avoiding sermons. I might even be allergic to sermons; they make me itch. So when offered the chance to come and sermonize to you tonight, I hesitated. I usually avoid the Bible, as it has been my experience that if someone is quoting the Bible at me I'm about to get mad. But then I remembered the Church of the Funnies, and I was tempted into coming here and doing a little proselytizing.

When I was small my mother used to make me and my sisters all presentable every Sunday morning and then haul us off to church. On our way out the door we were usually treated to the sight of my dad lying on the living room sofa with the newspaper spread comfortably around him, reading the Sunday comics. One Sunday I said to my mom, "Why doesn't Dad have to come to church with us?" And my dad, overhearing me, replied, "I don't belong to your church." Which was quite true; we were Catholic and my dad was First Congregational, a sort of Protestant. I said, "What church do you belong to? Why aren't you in church?" And my dad replied, "I belong to the Church of the Funnies."

Now, at the time I thought, *ha, ha, Dad*, and skulked off to church. But it stayed with me, this notion of the Church of the Funnies. And it grew. What began in my mind as a bunch of Peanuts characters sitting in the pew next to me evolved. And now the Church

of the Funnies is a big church, a mega-church, and in my mind it encompasses not only comics of every sort but also all of Art. The Church of the Funnies has room for Snoopy, children's drawings, Mark Rothko's Chapel, the Sistine Ceiling, every Dickens character, Bugs Bunny cartoons, all the books in all the libraries in all the languages, all the art lost in wars, the art not yet made by artists not yet born. Make a doodle on a bar mat in a pub just before last call and you are making a sacred offering in the Church of the Funnies. Its parishioners are a varied bunch, but I imagine us as anyone who looks for solace or inspiration in art, anyone who asks the big questions and tries to use art to find the answers.

In first grade as we prepared for First Communion I remember my teacher explaining the Commandments; the Second Commandment was given as: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." And I was fine with that, I was a child of the American Midwest and we were, mostly, very polite kids. But when I encountered the text in the Bible a few years later, part of it read: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth." Whoa. Wait a minute. This is Exodus 20:4. For me it was the beginning of doubt.

My teachers said it was supposed to mean: *Hey! Don't worship any statues or images of other Gods! The real, One True God is formless and you can't make a picture of Him anyway, so forget it.* But as a little Catholic I was surrounded by images of God, Jesus, Mary, little white doves that were supposed to mean the Holy Spirit, various saints with

their various body parts chopped off and on display. When I was small I was quite devout. I would make shrines in my bedroom, conglomerations of holy cards and flowers, dolls, suitcases and things like buttons and shells that just looked pretty. Also occasionally my gerbils were allowed to investigate the shrines because heck why not? I didn't understand how to reconcile the crucifix that hung in every classroom of my school with the No Graven Images policy. I couldn't wrap my tiny brain around the concept of a symbol: this isn't the thing, it's just here to remind you of the thing. The imaginary was very real to me. Jesus, the Easter Bunny, Peter Pan, Narnia, Moses, St. Joan of Arc, Paddington Bear: all equally invisible, all equally real. Though I have to admit that it was Santa who loomed largest in my celestial hierarchy. In art school I once saw some graffiti that said it well: "Jesus saves, but Santa gives." I didn't want to annoy anybody, so I prayed to everybody who might be listening.

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that is in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth."

What can I say about that except: Too late. We've already made millions and millions of images. We have made images on cave walls of horses and bison and of our own hands. We have made small ladies with enormous bosoms and bottoms out of stone, clay and bone in the hopes of fertility. We have made statues of so many gods and goddesses, paintings of the Madonna and baby Jesus, portraits of saints, woodcuts of geishas and samurai, murals of famous communists, gigantic Buddhas carved into hillsides, presidents' heads carved out of mountains, bazillions of selfies on millions of phones, billboards of movie stars, movies of dancing penguins, an eight hour film of the Empire

State Building, television commercials for sneakers and electric cars and politicians and breakfast cereal. We have made photographs of the earth from outer space. We have made scans of our own brains while we are thinking about sex, ultrasounds of fetuses, footprints of newborn babies. We have made countless videos of cats behaving foolishly. We have attempted to photograph ghosts. We take digital photos of ourselves standing in front of famous paintings.

John Lennon once got into trouble by suggesting that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. I am going to live dangerously here in front of you in this incredibly impressive church by asserting that some of us believe in Art more than we believe in God.

I managed to leave the Catholic church when I was fifteen. I made a deal with my mom: I would read the Bible and I didn't have to go to church anymore. The problem with this bargain was that reading the Bible only fed my fury with the whole idea of God and authority in general. The Old Testament is full of injustice, arbitrary behavior, patriarchal assumptions and all-purpose insanity. It presents God as the Supernatural Toddler, having tantrums about every little thing, and also as the Ultimate Bad Dad, handing out punishments out of all proportion to the sins of the hapless humans. Raining frogs, plagues of locusts. Slaughters of innocents. Ladies turned to pillars of salt, the whole world wiped out in forty days and forty nights of rain. Jeepers. The Bible read as though God was a gleefully sadistic author, intent on chastising his characters for no reason except his own amusement. I put down the Good Book, confused. On the radio Elvis Costello sang (*What's So Funny 'Bout*) *Peace Love and Understanding?* I went

back to reading, slogging toward the virgin birth, the babe in the manger. I needed a God who made sense to me and I could not find Him in these pages.

I did eventually join the Church of the Funnies: I became an artist. My application essay for art school was about my desire to become an Art Nun. This had nothing to do with poverty or celibacy, it was about devotion. I was trying to express my willingness to devote my life to Art, to forsake all other pursuits and to be a ruthless dreamer, a bride of Art. I was ready to serve, and the thing I wanted to serve was the mystery, the beauty, the deep transcendence I experienced with certain works of art. I was looking for the communion of souls in the museum, in the library, on the radio, and finding it there more often than not.

One day in art school, in 1982 or so, a professor handed me a Xerox of a speech by Jacques Barzun. It was called *The Rise of Art as Religion* and the central idea, that art has taken the place of religion in our daily lives, that art is occupying the void left by our retreat from God, this idea made a lot of sense to me. He wrote it in 1973, it was one of a series of talks he gave that were published under the title *The Use and Abuse of Art*. To me, a nineteen-year-old art student, the idea that art could be useful was startling; I had been brought up on “art for art’s sake” and it had never occurred to me to ask what art is for. Why do we make art? What is it supposed to do?

Those beautiful drawings on the walls of the caves are surely not the earliest things humans made, but they are what we have now, they have survived all this time, and time

has not deprived them of their power, time has only added to their mystery. In a young world, when there were not many man-made things, these drawings must have thrilled everyone who saw them. Someone stood there, all those years ago, with a burnt stick in his or her small hand, and made: a picture. This may have had to do with their religion, but I imagine that when the artist stood back and looked at the finished drawing, that artist felt the same way artists always feel at that moment: joy, and disappointment. It's good, but it isn't as good as the thing we meant to make. The thing we cannot quite achieve leads us to make the next thing, and the next after that. We make things to find out what they are, what they can be, what they might mean. We make things to keep us company in the world. We make things to show them to other people, because we want them to understand.

The thing that makes us want God is the same thing that makes us want Art—we want meaning. We want there to be more than meets the eye.

God is an attempt at an explanation for the universe. Art is not an explanation. Art is a question that is permanently unanswered.

Art is like the little red laser dot being chased by Claudine, my cat: it's uncatchable, and if you do catch it, it disappears. And God is like that, too. Elusive, maybe non-existent, though others have attested to His reality.

Shortly after I graduated from art school I was having lunch with my mother in a Chinese restaurant when she told me that she was leaving the Catholic church. I was surprised, but it made sense. She had been doing a lot of reading, some Joseph Campbell, some books about American Indians, books about Buddhism. She didn't like the way the

church treated women; she had quietly observed a lot of contradictions and worrisome ideas being advocated by the church and she had decided she was done with that.

A few weeks later I found a letter in our laundry room; my mom had accidentally or on purpose left it there so I read it. It was from the pastor of our church. It said he was sorry she was leaving but perhaps she would change her mind and come back and so could she please continue tithing the same amount of money she had been giving before? It was perhaps the most cringe-worthy letter I have ever read before or since. Even though I had deserted Catholicism I still wanted it to be above everyday things like money. I wanted the church to be holy and pure, and it persisted in being a human thing, full of human inconsistencies. And maybe I love it and hate it all the more for that.

In the Church of the Funnies the sins are different from the sins in the Ten Commandments. Hardly anybody in the Church of the Funnies seems to mind a little mild blasphemy, and making graven images of everything heavenly and earthly and under the sea is no problem at all. The seven deadly sins of art are: Unoriginality, Dishonesty, Censorship, Banality, Sentimentality, Egotism, and Selling Out. You can see that these somewhat correspond to the originals (which are Lust, Envy, Sloth, Wrath, Gluttony, Greed and Pride, in case you need a quick review). The virtues of art are: Humility, Patience, Originality, Openness, Generosity, Diligence, and Gratitude.

You might have noticed that this Church of the Funnies, this religion of Art, does not require genius, or even talent. We all aspire toward quality. We all do our best. Whether we are artists, trying to create, or audience members, trying to understand, we bring our virtuous Openness and Diligence to the task, and we are Generous and Grateful if we

manage to connect with the art, or each other. We accept any hints we may receive about the nature of the universe with Humility. We try not to Sell Out on the way to serving the mysterious Church of the Funnies, or God, or Santa, or whomever might be listening.

The other day I called my mom because I wanted to run this sermon by her, to make sure she didn't mind me telling the world about her spiritual concerns. My mother is also an artist, so she knew what I meant about this Church of the Funnies business. She's a quilter and a fiber artist and she knows that feeling, when you open yourself out to the nothingness, and then there is something, an idea, that wasn't there a moment ago, but now it seems to have been just waiting for you to ask. Some people have called this divine inspiration, to be breathed upon by the gods. My mom surprised me by saying that she and my dad had talked this over, inspiration and creation and all of it, the whole shebang, and that they'd agreed: everything is connected. It doesn't matter if you call it God or Art or the Funnies or a cat chasing an uncatchable red laser dot. Mom said that she and Dad had always liked the idea of the Force, in the Star Wars movies. Yes, I said, I'm sure a lot of people feel the same about that. We both paused, because it felt a little weird to be discussing heavy philosophical ideas in Star Wars jargon, but there it is: everything is connected. May the Force be with you. Amen.