

ACTIVISM AND INWARDNESS

Nathan Schneider

The genre of testimony is one that a serious writer would do best to avoid. By *testimony* I mean a very particular subset of first-person narrative—this isn't autobiography (of one's life as such), or reportage (of one's adventures), or confession (of one's misadventures), or testimonial (of one's experiences with certain products). Each of those genres can be adapted, free of cringing, to a modern, literary, secular voice. One can write in them, post the result on the Internet, then afterward live to write another genre.

Testimony is different. That's because writers are supposed to be in control, aware of themselves and those around them. Supremely so—that's why *we're* the writers. But testimony doesn't permit this. Whether one testifies from the stand in a courtroom or the sanctuary of a church, testimony is about forces beyond one's control or comprehension. In court, testimony takes place in the midst of an imposing and perplexing and grinding process by which justice is purported to be done, and over which the witness has as little control as the lawyer class can make possible. Such a testimony can be only part of the story, and it will be heard only through a mysterious combination of performative and bureaucratic filters.

Testimony coming from a Christian has similar features. This kind of testimony is a story about what God has done in one's life; the main character in such a story is supposed to be God, but since the testifier is a human being and not God, God's activities present themselves only through what the testifier claims God has done in her or his life. A writer conveying such experience has little opportunity to take credit for

anything important that takes place, yet all the while implicitly asserting the fact of being a subject of God's particular concern. Testimony is thus both pious and submissive, two gigantic no-nos of the modern writerly voice. Christian testimony is also typically evangelistic, which is to say propagandistic, and that is supposed to be even worse.

The following is a testimony. It feels like testimony to me, anyway; by charting the progress of certain flighty, troublesome sensations upon which my sense of self seemed to depend, I mean to describe the nature and activity of Something Else. I hope it is also a little propagandistic.

After that little preface, on to the introduction. It dwells on a passage from Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, a book that has been a consistent companion to me ever since I discovered it in a used bookstore while a student. The passage struck me with particular force as I was first formulating this essay in April 2013, when armored people and vehicles were rolling through the deserted streets of Cambridge hunting down, and eventually shooting, the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing. Murdoch considers some words from the Book of Romans: "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now."¹ And so it goes:

The spectacle of the terrible suffering of others may prompt not only sympathy but also a sense of guilt which may be overwhelming. (This was felt by many people in relation to the Holocaust.) So it may be felt that not only "personal spirituality," but also moral philosophy and traditional theology are out of place in a world tormented by poverty, misery and cruelty: that old-fashioned generalisations, or calm reflections upon inwardness, are too abstract and dreamy and indeed selfish to be *true* for a post-Hitler post-Stalin overpopulated nuclear planet. Such an attitude may make benevolent social fanatics, or could lead to terrorism, where a particular cause, idolised as just, produces a callous indifference to other values. But one does not have to choose between activism and inwardness or feel that one is bound to swallow the other. A morality of axioms needs the intuitive control of a more widely reflective and general morality. In a good society these ways of thinking, while always in tension, know their roles and places, and when they have rights against each other.²

“Activism and inwardness.” That pairing sounds like a contradiction when one is trying to testify to one’s private experience in the midst of a sudden spell of martial law. The luxury of inwardness, of “calm reflection,” has the rug swept out from under it by the men in body armor, by the conversation-stopping category of terrorism, by the discovery of just how army-like the local cops have become. There goes the dreamy theology. Time for activism? Perhaps, but by this point the contagiousness of doom may have had its way.

This juxtaposition takes me back. It takes me back, for instance, to the evening when I was sitting alone in the lounge of my dorm room in college, watching the fuzzy night-vision footage on the news of Baghdad as U.S. bombs were expected to fall any minute. I’d spent the day going to rallies against the war, but not quite able to see past the apparent futility of it. I sat for a while, trying to endure the television, switching it on and off mute, until finally turning it off altogether, while rumors of the first Tomahawk missile strikes cascaded across the networks, before the real “shock and awe” began.

I was 18, a freshman, and a far more metaphorical bomb was about to drop: That Easter, I would be baptized a Christian and accepted into the Catholic Church. This was a process I was wholly committed to, but which had me nevertheless confounded. Most mornings I woke up in a state of terror. It wasn’t the terrorism of bombs falling, but an inward kind of terror, a craving for the calm that reflection might render. There was a lot on my mind. I wanted, and felt I needed, to think about it. No one else could; it was *personal*. God, I hoped, was working on something in me. Anyway, protest or not, conversion or not, non-metaphorical bombs fell that night on Baghdad.

After the war began, I did less protesting. The insularity of undergraduate life made that fairly easy. I speculated, reflected, paused, considered, prayed, and read a lot. The social guilt about this seclusion, which Murdoch alluded to, was as deferrable as a student loan. I got somewhat better at being a Christian, and a Catholic, but not all that confident in it. I knew this was what I was, but I often couldn’t figure out how to say so to myself or others. I responded by escalating the speculations, and they became ever more abstract.

There is another verse from that same chapter in Romans that speaks to the quality of my prayers and thoughts and the substance of my hope

at the time: “We know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”³

This is how abstract the groanings became: I finished college (having studied computers and religion), went to graduate school (having studied religion and the brain), and within a year or so of dropping out and moving to New York to disguise myself as a reporter, I was writing a book about proofs of the existence of God. That word had caught hold of me: *proof*—its claim to certainty, to conviction. It seemed to offer the relief of conviction by way of pure thought, if only one could pick out the right propositions, and comprehend them, and stack them up in one’s brain manfully enough that the sweat of it trickles down and satisfies one’s heart. And I figured that, well, if I could write a whole book about proofs, maybe that would do the trick.

If you asked at the time why I was writing the thing, I would give some sort of long-winded answer about the fact that how people talk and write about religious proofs today doesn’t do justice to what the tradition of these things is *really* about, that we strip the proofs out of the flesh from which they *really* came, extracting them from history and personhood and social context so as to misuse them for the particular neopositivist discourse about religion and reason that the culture wars use as a clever veneer over the economic, regional, and sexual politics that are *really* at play when people think they’re arguing about God. Furthermore when one looks upon the historic proofs in their own terms, they open up questions that are more interesting than the one that currently transfixes people, “Does God exist?”; rather, the classic proofs were more often aimed at raising questions that wouldn’t even occur to many of us but are potentially much more compelling and even nourishing, such as “What do we mean by God?” and “What would count as proof?”, and thereby these proofs have as much to do with describing experience as they do with assuring belief. A bonus: tracing this tradition of proof historically also puts one almost exclusively in the company of men—Iris Murdoch, a prover in her own right, was an exception—who in turn were participating in an activity with certain exclusionary features of which they were rarely aware, making the project also at least in part a potentially revealing study of religious masculinity.

I never quite nailed an elevator speech for all that. The proposal did, however, include some simple little line drawings, and when the University of California Press mailed me a contract to write the book for them, it specified that to counter the grandiosity of the subject a certain number of those drawings should be submitted along with the manuscript.

Writing the book, like writing most books for most people, took longer than I'd thought. Everything turned out to be complicated. Even *proof*. The word's common meaning as a nice, neat, logical formula is only the first definition of many. It means a lot of other things, too. One can *prove oneself*, for instance, on a journey that one somehow survives and comes out from more whole. Like a printer's proof, a proof can be a test, an experiment, a first run. Like the proof of a liquor, one thing leads to another. Each of these meanings played a role in the stories I found myself telling, as well as in my own process of learning how to tell them—in draft after draft after draft. Just as for so many of the proofs I wrote about, the book disguised itself as a solitary, inward endeavor but was in fact only possible because I had a lot of help from the people I could call on for the favor of feedback.

Yet, on Sundays at Mass, in between weekdays of library research and writing, solitary I was in a pew. The prayer that forced itself into my mind, during the fertile moments of kneeling after having received Communion: *God, don't let me slander you. Don't let me lie about you because it's easier than saying the truth about myself. Because it is so tempting. Because I am a doubter trying to tell the world about certainty. Because I'm not sure any of these abstractions make any sense, but they're alluring to me anyway, and they give me this peculiar pleasure to try to figure out, and I have no idea if they're leading me anywhere near you, but I really hope they are because I'm in too deep now and wouldn't know how to even begin turning back or quitting. Just like I'm stuck in this religion not knowing if I belong. God, let this ridiculous project lead me to you.*

Meanwhile, I went on trips. I went to philosophy conferences and God debates and made several visits to Biola University, a Bible college on the southern edge of Los Angeles County. There, and in Chicago, and in Marietta, Georgia, I got to know William Lane Craig, American evangelicalism's most fearsome wielder of proofs. After what adds up to several weeks in rooms with him, hearing him talk about everything from the historicity of the New Testament accounts to the latest cosmology in physics, I never heard even the slightest hint of doubt in him that the whole

point of the universe, from beginning to end, is solely to get more people to make a heartfelt decision to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. But somehow I didn't quite recognize in Craig's airtight synthesis the religion I'd fallen for as a teenager.

By then I could talk about proofs forever, pick apart their ins and outs, gossip about their creators, and posit my own theories about them that would sometimes impress experts. I loved the proofs and the provers. But it wasn't clear what this had to do with the love of God. Except for those rare and pleasant moments when the ontological argument would grab hold of me and carry me in my inwardness a couple inches closer to That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived, the proofs were just a job. Intellectually I disagreed mightily with those who contend that the tradition of proofs can be brushed aside because meaningful proof of God is unattainable, or because the God of proof is separate from the God of faith; Ibn Tufayl, Anselm, Spinoza, Hegel, and so many others among my heroes testified to the impact of proof in their lives. Yet my own material for testimony so far provided no such rejoinder.

The book would be titled *God in Proof*. I wanted a title that could be read in at least two ways, for productive tension and plausible deniability. It could be read as being about "the paltry god that people concoct from the proofs their minds come up with" or "the respects in which God Almighty is actually perceptible through proofs." I went back and forth about my own opinion on the correct interpretation. While writing, I would probably err on the side of the former and back it up with some of the analytical points alluded to above. But this is retrospect now, and so I can say with a bit more honesty that really what I was secretly after was the latter.

When *God in Proof* at last came out, the reviews were good, if not exactly as over the top as one might have wished—except for a five-part series of gushy blog posts by a Reformed minister near Chicago. I was surprised that there weren't more reviews like that from a reader on Amazon titled "Curious Disengagement."⁴ In addition to noting certain gaps in my account of recent philosophy of religion, the reader found that the story of my conversion in the book seemed strangely separate from the journey among the proofs. "To me, anyway," he wrote, "the point of 'proofs' is one of persuasion." He didn't get the impression—correctly—that my own persuasion was hanging by the thread of Alvin

Plantinga's modal ontological argument, or by some particular solution to the problem of evil.

"The 'proofs' seem to have little to do with his beliefs," the reviewer concluded with regard to me. "Mr. Schneider seems to float outside the arguments."

There is, thank goodness, more to the world than what a young man does or doesn't happen to believe. The bombs still fell on Baghdad either way. Limbs were torn from limbs, homes were flattened, soldiers stormed in, their commanders presuming to turn the present into a page of history, to be remembered forever after because of the tumult their weaponry could produce. The scenes of the city shown on the news stations were purposely granular and oriented toward the most exotic-looking buildings, to ensure that viewers would not mistake momentous history for mere violence.

The largest mass mobilization in history had occurred to protest the invasion, but it happened anyway. I could turn off the television in my college dorm, but what was taking place in Baghdad happened anyway.

Let me provide some gratuitous testimony from an inward activist named Kathy Kelly, who spent those days in a Baghdad hotel with Iraqi friends:

When the attacks began, Umm Miladah could often be seen uncontrollably shuddering from fear. Day and night, explosions would rattle the windows and cause the Al Fanar's walls to shake. Ear-splitting blasts and sickening thuds would come from all directions, near and far, over the next two weeks. I would often hold Miladah, who was three years old, and Zainab, her 18-month-old baby sister, in my arms. That's how I realized that they both had begun to grind their teeth, morning, noon, and night. Several times, we witnessed eight-year-old Dima, the daughter of another hotel worker, gazing up in forlorn shame at her father from a pool of her own urine, having lost control of her bladder in the first days of "Shock and Awe."⁵

The U.S. wars of the first decade of the twenty-first century are especially difficult to picture. Many of those in my generation who went to war—Christopher Hitchens said something to the effect that they were the only ones who really believed in anything—came back with

nightmares and post-traumatic ghosts from what they saw. I, staying behind, appreciated but nonetheless hated the ease with which one could go on with ordinary life without considering the fact that we were at war. In college and graduate school, I tried to write essays on this condition, but my professors didn't seem to find any sense in them. A college friend of mine was attacked all over right-wing radio for writing in a campus magazine that she sided with the Iraqi insurgency.

Even now, I have to go through a bit of mental gymnastics to remind myself of what actually happened, that it could have happened at all. The war seems unbelievable, and in my memory, it is overshadowed by things seemingly far less significant. James Agee explained in the course of a tangent in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that he refused to acknowledge the seriousness of geopolitical wars—World War II, no less, in his case—compared to the war he fought daily in his writing. While perhaps I acted as if my petty writing was all that mattered, I couldn't be so sanguine about that in my head as he was.

I found myself wondering, all the time, what would my generation do? What would be our moment—when, rather than simply populating the Internet, or killing on command, would we display a bit of agency in the world? What would it take?

In the course of a period of pursuing this question quite strenuously, I stumbled into at least one kind of answer. During the summer of 2011, in the wake of the poplar uprisings across the Middle East and Europe, I was looking for where the wave might break in the United States. I began finding small groups of people who, independently, were planning occupations of public space. Frustrated with how the media tends to cover protests—only when they hit the streets, rather than in the all-important process of strategizing and organizing—I went to their meetings. One of those groups was a circle of disparate New Yorkers who were preparing for what would become Occupy Wall Street. I became the first reporter they allowed to cover the proceedings.

There are as many ways of saying what the Occupy movement became as there were people who took part—and many more unfounded tales in addition. One of those ways is to call it a kind of great awakening. If Occupy had been merely a reaction to the calamity of the 2008 financial crisis, it would have come a few years earlier and been far more depressing. Instead, it was a catching of the spirit of hope that had been

spreading across the planet that year, a convergence of inspiration and possibility—and, I do think, faith.

Accouterments of religion were always there, although the dominant culture of Occupy was that of a secular social movement. The first people I noticed as I arrived on the first day of the occupation were white-robed divinity students who'd come down from Boston to serve as "Protest Chaplains"; by the time night fell, Occupiers were forming meditation circles to calm themselves while police officers massed along Broadway. During the two months of occupation, the re-named Liberty Square was obviously and palpably a sacred space—to the point that, for those of us who'd bonded with it, anywhere else felt like a lesser form of reality. The manner of worship there was the total reconstruction of daily life, from the kitchens to the hand signals to the jargon—an assembly, an *ecclesia*, in the biblical sense. They held all things in common to contradict a society of rampant inequality. They gave up jobs, school, and safety, putting themselves in danger of batons and arrests for the sake of a hope within them. The police brought a lot of carnage, but against the spirit of preemptive wars the protesters urged each other to nonviolence. Though the movement's every effort to sow a renewal of democratic spirit was rife with all sorts of inadequacy and disappointment, for me and many others its grace seemed sufficient to suggest that this community on the whole was a blessed one.

When the police finally had their way with the encampment, and it was forcibly evicted, the role of religion became less figurative and more critical. First, Occupiers slept in the churches across New York that took them in. Before long, they were calling for a particularly rich church, Trinity Wall Street, to lend them land. They petitioned and protested Trinity not because they disliked churches, but because these supposedly secular protesters thought they knew better than Trinity's vestry what being a church actually means. And I think they were right. It was some of these same people who, in the fall of 2012, organized the Occupy Sandy hurricane relief effort, which turned two large churches in Brooklyn into warehouses for emergency goods. I would look across the pews completely covered in boxes of supplies and feel like I was seeing a real church in action for the first time.

In the midst of all this, I found myself needing to put down my notebook and take up a sign. I helped start a group called Occupy Catholics, and we charged ourselves with being a presence of Catholic tradition in the

movement and a presence of the movement in Catholicism. Never before had I acted and spoken so publicly as the Catholic Christian I claimed to have become, and never before had I felt so much like one. We devised tricks for bringing stale traditions back to life in the context of the movement. We ranted about usury. Around Holy Thursday, we washed the dirty feet of Occupiers, smelling what real foot-washing means, what it meant when Christ did it for his friends. Sleeping a night on the sidewalk in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral taught me about the cruelty of mosquitoes for the homeless in Midtown. I even preached a little on street corners with good news for the poor. It so happened that God worked mighty signs in me by means of the Occupy movement.

I found myself writing a book about that, too. Again, it would have a title that can be read two ways: *Thank You, Anarchy*. There are parts of the story where that “thank you” is forthright and grateful to anarchy—to the moments when the aspiration for openness and leaderlessness made it possible to reclaim some of the basic essence of what politics was always supposed to be about, when people felt free to pour their talents without reserve into that effulgent commons. And then there were times when the “thank you” sounded more sarcastic, more taunting: “Thanks a lot”—for the movement's inability to live up to what it aspired to, for how it let us revel so freely in a hope that the status quo would eventually crush. In both these meanings, I saw theology. The subtitle was *Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse*.

In the end I found myself faced with the distressing and ironic, though perhaps not entirely surprising, fact that, between a book about God and a book about a protest movement, the book about the protest movement ended up having more evidence of my own faith in it.

The devoted remnants of Occupy Wall Street, in the spring on 2012, planned their movement's apotheosis for May 1 of that year—May Day. They dreamed up a series of massive events meant to turn New York City into a jubilee, crowned by a viral general strike. But as every huckster date-setter from William Miller to Harold Camping learns, being too specific about the Second Coming gets you in trouble. May Day came and went, climaxing with a big march that would've been perfectly respectable had it not been measured against the standard of Changing Everything. In the days that followed, a lot of the organizers I'd been spending

the past eight months with were devastated and lost, and they drifted out of the city for a break, or returned to some important sector of their lives that they'd been neglecting for the sake of revolution. They stopped to notice the traumas they'd accumulated. I turned to my books—to start the process of assembling my notes and articles on Occupy, and to do the final tightening-up of the manuscript and illustrations for *God in Proof*.

I saw the thing now with new eyes—the “God book,” as I now had to refer to it for the sake of distinguishing it from the Occupy one. Returning to the proofs then, a movement later and a full decade after my conversion had begun, they made a whole different kind of sense. The God on the other side of them was not a hypothesis or a possibility or a problem but a reality. Not such a hard thing. Each in their own way, the proofs elucidated a part of this reality, offering an inward encounter with it. They were beautiful and holy. The viscera of a messy movement about right and wrong, and my trace amounts of participation in it, had left firm in me the conviction that there is a right, and a sovereign love, however elusive and difficult to parse, and that it made perfect sense that the incarnation of such love should take the form of an executed dissident.

I'm not saying that the movement was some new messiah (though that was the title of chapter two), but only that, for me at least, almighty God seems to have employed the movement as a means of pointing back toward God's own self. After that, all the more so, so did the proofs. By themselves, and in my lonely head, I hadn't been able to force them to show me God. But when I let God become more apparent to me in the world, the proofs' ever-partial revelations became less a matter of frustration than of insight. One could say the same about washing dirty feet. Each proof is a little bit of a picture of a God who neither exists nor doesn't exist but who becomes especially real in a moment when there's something profoundly wrong in the world and when that wrong gets defended with hundreds of police charging at a huddle of unarmed people, and when you see among those people outpourings of courage and dignity that they didn't know they had. I'm not claiming God is the only or the necessary conviction to arise from such phenomena, which did other things to other people, but after ten years of looking for God in logic, this was what I suppose I needed to be shown.

There was other stuff, too, that was helping to hold up the real substance of my faith, to make God feel real and important to me, to make

me able to call myself a Christian or a Catholic without some awful trailing qualification. There was a community of radical old Jesuits I went to supper with each month with friends; there was a nun I came to know who introduced me to her decade-long secret ministry to the transgender community; I met, and prayed with, the woman I would marry. In those instances of radical love were outlines and indications of a love far greater, a love stronger than death.

God in Proof and *Thank You, Anarchy* appeared in print, bewilderingly, within a few months of each other, in the middle of 2013. The task of simultaneously publicizing the results of my efforts on two such vastly different subjects provoked a bit of cognitive dissonance for me, and probably for others as well. One friend, an Occupy organizer, posted a picture on Facebook that said, above a drawing of my head, “NATHAN SCHNEIDER DOESN’T ALWAYS WRITE A BOOK,” and below it, “BUT WHEN HE DOES HE WRITES TWO—AND ONE IS ABOUT GOD.” The books probably seemed like they had nothing to do with each other, but for me they interrelated thoroughly.

Soon before he died in 1985, the lawyer-theologian William Stringfellow wrote a book on *The Politics of Spirituality*, a concise assault on the walls people tend to build between the political and the spiritual. One cannot pursue a merely personal spirituality apart from politics, he argued, because even trying to do so bears political implications. Christian spirituality cannot escape involving the ways in which we relate to fellow human beings. Nor can one do politics to the exclusion of spirituality; in choosing and acting on what we deem worthy of value in society, we select our gods. I’ll let Stringfellow speak for himself:

biblical spirituality includes one’s relationship with oneself, in the most self-conscious and radically personal sense, but it *simultaneously* implicates one concretely in reconciliation with the rest of creation and is thus *the most profoundly political reality available to human experience*.⁶

Which is to say:

Biblical spirituality represents politics in the broadest possible scope and in a dimension which nurtures, locates, and matures the personal or the self.⁷

To as partial and imprecise a degree as is to be expected in this condition of the Fall, that is a description of what was wrought in me by way of my efforts as a writer, which, for the most part, I have come to conclude, are a failure, except in the uses to which God has put them: to incline me, and hopefully a few others, to notice that, whatever we might claim to believe or doubt, love is lord of heaven and earth, and always within reach.

Notes

1. Romans 8:22. I'll use King James Version from here on out because that's what Murdoch does.
2. Murdoch, Iris, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 361–62.
3. Romans 8:26.
4. Bern, "Curious Disengagement," Amazon.com, August 18, 2013. <https://www.amazon.com/review/R1QXBNT9Q0XDEV/>
5. Kathy Kelly, "War without End," *Waging Nonviolence*, March 19, 2013. <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/war-without-end/>
6. Stringfellow, William, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 21.
7. *Ibid.*, 21.