

DIVINE SERVICE:
in a postmodern world

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Owen Barfield's essay, *The Coming Trauma of Materialism*, was published in 1976.¹ He compares the impending collapse of our dominant reality principle of materialism with the previous one of Aristotelianism, which had lasted for millennia. Materialism is a mental habit of thought, as Barfield explains:

the mental habit of taking for granted, for all practical purposes and most theoretical ones that the human psyche is intrinsically "alienated" from nature... a habit so inveterate as to have entered into the meanings of a great many common words and thus to have become accepted as common sense itself. Materialism in this sense is not, for instance, incompatible with deep religious conviction...

In this quote, Barfield explicitly connects language with soul or psyche. A particular psychic configuration (call it the subject-object style or Cartesianism) has entered language so thoroughly that it is accepted as fact or common sense. It takes centuries to root out these linguistic habits even when the given psychic configuration or style of consciousness has transformed in the "background" of the appearances. At this time enormous concerted collective effort is going into scouring our language of all traces not only of materialism but even Aristotelianism! We must turn to Aristotle to find the founding thinker of such terms as substance, universality/particularity, substrate, essence, consubstantiation, representations, etc. We still use these terms in our common language but across disciplines, every effort is being made to erase metaphysical thinking altogether from our discourse.

Overcoming metaphysical thinking was announced thunderously by Nietzsche and the West was plunged into nihilism (loss of meaning). Terms like "prime matter", "essence", "substance" "substrate" are now considered empty of meaning, in terms of referring to a substance, or essence, or substrate, having a thing-like structure. One of the crippling blows to ancient thinking occurred in physics when all reference to an "ether" was discounted in favour of empty space. But the scouring goes on even today:

we have to try and open this [Aristotelian] text in such a way that we ward off representation which already wants to hold on to the already known concepts of substance and substrate etc. that it no longer questions.²

Of course, when the substantiality of the metaphysical world was destroyed, all references to divinity had to go too as nihilism demands. Our modern world picture, as disclosed by our dominant cultural practices and discourses, precludes any metaphysical assertions whatsoever.

How can one serve a divinity that has no essence, substance, atemporality, eternity, cannot be hypostasised, or represented in any way whatsoever, etc? Or, is it really true that there is no divinity to serve?



In Rudolph Otto's famous book, *The Idea of the Holy*, he offers a phenomenological approach to the divine which opened the way to studying the core experiences that found all religions of the world at all times. He invoked the term *numinous* to describe the "object" of the human experience of a mysterious terror and awe, and majesty, in the presence of that which is entirely *other* and thus incapable, he thinks,

¹ See: <https://thefiendjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/14-the-coming-trauma-of-materialism.pdf>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e1I6zthYSw>

of being expressed directly through human language and other media. His description of course captures the numinous experience of visionaries, mystics, prophets throughout history. Such a description in my view, as we will see, also paves the way for a postmodern experience of divinity, followed perhaps by a decision to serve that divinity.

But there is a difficulty for us moderns!

Millions of people today, in Ukraine for example, are experiencing terror on a daily basis but this terror cannot be described as mysterious. There can be found no awe or majesty to open the victims of war up to the Holy. They are going through a purely secular horror. The idea of serving divinity would be insane under these circumstances... for the vast majority.

Otto is therefore getting at something further than the emotional responses of human beings faced with horror, torture, or other extreme states of mind. He carefully says that all these emotions and moods must take place in *the majesty of a presence that is entirely other*.

How can we begin to understand this pivotal qualification to his idea of the Holy, in our postmodern age?



In one major effort from the field of depth psychology Jungian Analyst Wolfgang Giegerich wrote a series of essays on the nuclear bomb.. He offers a challenge to our postmodern sensibility:

Are you suffering from the loss of meaning? Searching for a spiritual dimension? Wanting to reconnect to the imagination? Longing for a God, a fate, an unprogrammed future? Don't go to India, nor back to classical or primitive mythology, nor off into drugs nor into yourself. Go to our reality, try the real thing: try the nuclear bomb. All the riches of the imaginal that we think we have lost are there, stuffed away and buried and hidden, but also preserved in its terror, waiting to be redeemed.^{3 4}

He is explicit in identifying the nuclear bomb (as image) with divinity:

What in the shape of the nuclear bomb is knocking at our door and wants to be received into consciousness is nothing else but God's own reality... It is not I who deifies the nuclear bomb. Objective phenomenology has long done so... Is it not, to cite Rudolf Otto, the numinous power of our age?⁵

Giegerich describes his method as objective phenomenology, by which he means *soul* phenomenology. He takes the already-given language/images of our technological civilisation as the prime matter to be ensouled and then follows his psychological method, leading to his conclusion that the image of the bomb conceals *within* itself a “past” or now departed soul activity that has manifested in our time as the numinous power of our age—the nuclear bomb.

An example of his method may be found in his approach to biblical text describing Jesus as both being blameless and at the same time carrying the evil of the world. Giegerich is led to this text through his mind's participation with the modern phenomenon of the bomb:

³ Giegerich, W (2007). “Saving the Nuclear Bomb” in *Technology and The Soul*. (New Orleans, Spring Publications, 36)

⁴ See my effort in this regard: https://www.academia.edu/35453625/The_Meaning_of_the_Bomb_as_World_Destroyer_2014_

⁵ Giegerich, W (2007). “The Nuclear Bomb and the Fate of God” in *Technology and The Soul*. (New Orleans, Spring Publications, 98).

Christianity was able to deliver from sin through the in-one-another of concentrated sin and innocent lamb. This type of in-one-another, however, is precisely the blueprint of the Bomb: outside a harmless shell, inside a concentrated diabolic terror. The greater the tension of opposites—i.e., the purer and the more concentrated they are, the closer innocence and aggressive power are joined, the more intimately one encapsulates the other—the stronger the explosive power. The explosive shell is not an incidental by-product of Christianity; it is essential to its central purpose. If Christianity wants really to overcome the world, it must have the power to explode the world, must itself be a bomb, and as such Christianity has indeed always understood itself, even if not by means of this metaphor.⁶

To put it another way, Giegerich has uncovered the archetypal roots of the modern image of the Bomb in Christian theology, as handed down the centuries through our language. His method depends on the *a priori* that language and soul reflect each other—that soul or the objective psyche is now to be discerned as reflected in language, textual or otherwise, and no longer as reflected in the *things* of the world. This psychological work is cool, beyond the fluctuations of mood, emotion, or finally, image.⁷

Giegerich asks, “is it (the bomb) not the numinous power of our age?” He asks this after uncovering the archetypal images that have finally materialised as the bomb. So he is really asking, “is the archetype underlying the modern image of the bomb not the numinous power of our age?”

But listen to what he says about archetypes and numinosity supposedly appearing in dream to the postmodern mind! In criticising Jungian psychology’s attempt to account for the numinous power of images, or desire to “restore to the phenomenal image itself its full reality value and autonomy”, he claims the opposite result was produced:

... that the image contains its own numinous realness in itself is merely asserted [by psychology]; the image is supposed to contain it. But merely from looking at the phenomenal image you cannot tell that it is equipped with this [numinous] power. So in reality, you end up with the image as a formality, on the one hand, plus your added reassurance that it carries its archetypal depth within itself, on the other. But such a subjective reassurance, being wholly dependent on our belief and remaining external to the image that it is about, does not count. It is a speculative or ideological accessory.⁸

On this explicit basis, Giegerich’s claim that the (image of) the bomb is the numinous power of our age may also be subjected to the very criticism that he levels at Jungian psychology and its attempts to find living divinity *within* the linguistic/archetypal depository of our Western heritage!

In the sense of the Holy that Otto means and Giegerich refers to, the answer to Giegerich’s rhetorical question, “is it (the bomb) not the numinous power of our age?” must be “no”. Giegerich’s “numinous power” is “departed”, i.e. a discovery of reflective thinking. Compare his cool descriptions to that of the likely experience of Moses facing the Burning Bush, or any visionary for whom divinity appears as numen! Giegerich leads the way in his attacks on Jungian Psychology towards convincing us that such numinous experiences are impossible for the postmodern man or woman. Our technological consciousness is too complex, too mediated for such experiences of divinity, he claims throughout his works, even as he also reserves such a claim of numinous power to the phenomenon of the bomb.

It is true that the *prospect* of the bomb going off may terrify us, but there is no “mysterious terror and awe, and majesty, in the presence of that which is entirely *other*” in relation to the bomb at all for most of us. It must be a secular (mostly fancied or media-driven) horror, according to Giegerich. No numinous experience of the Holy or divinity at all, even as he asserts the bomb to be *our* numen—a

⁶ Giegerich, W. Op. Cit. “Invention of Explosive Power and the Blueprint of the Bomb” 110

⁷ Psychology as the Discipline of Interiority: <https://www.ispdi.org>

⁸ Giegerich, W. (2008) *The Soul’s Logical Life* (NY: Peter Lang, 168)

strange contradiction it seems. The most Giegerich can and does offer, consistent with his psychology, is a thinking experience of the now departed soul activity (no numinosity) that gave rise to our current technological civilisation and its bomb in the first place.

His method has nothing to do with any numinous experience of divinity as it may appear to a postmodern consciousness, in its character of entering or disrupting history for the first time, i.e. as an inceptive moment in time, be-speaking the unknown but forming future, the coming-to-be of a new divinity.⁹ Giegerich takes the conversation about Otto's idea of the Holy as lived experience only as far as this:

We have to learn to suffer our hands to be empty, in the fullest sense of the word "suffer". No image. No symbols. No meaning. No Gods: No religion. For is it not the empty hand, and the empty hand alone, that can be filled? As long as we cling to our religious traditions, we pretend to be in possession of something. We thereby prevent the advent of what can come, if at all, only as the free gift of the real world to him who is ready to receive because he has nothing whatsoever of his own accord, as the gift to him who no longer, with a modesty that is disguised arrogance, denounces our poverty as nihilism, but comprehends it as the presence of the unknown future.¹⁰

This paragraph represents Giegerich's acceptance of today's objective postmodern ontological status. This is as far as he wants to go, or can go in terms of the our predicament of meaninglessness or disconnection from any experience of the holy.or divine.

His suggested approach to the divinity of the bomb—"does not God's reality, does not his dreadfulness, does not the nuclear bomb demand of us that we worship it..."¹¹ is argued in a subtle thinking manner and, as we can see in the full paragraph below (see n. 11), he is really making a case for a deeper centre within the soul that *could* "authorise" such worship, *if* experienced as the soul activity that carries the phenomenology of the nuclear bomb. But *this* experience is forever out of reach of any psychological method that focusses on the *departed* soul, as Giegerich does. It seems clear that Giegerich has not had the individual experience of facing the core of the phenomenon of the nuclear bomb psychologically, as Jung did, i.e. in its inceptive or *futural* character. The Self is confronting us with all the phenomenology of the bomb in order to penetrate the obdurateness of our current materialism and the hardened structure of mind that corresponds to it. The collision results in an enormous and devastating release of energies which begin to forge new potent and living language, originating a new

⁹ See my description: https://www.academia.edu/36216414/OWEN_BARFIELDS_UNANCESTRAL_VOICE_an_uncommon_understanding_2018_

¹⁰ Giegerich, W. (2005) "Rupture: Or Psychology and Religion" in *The Neurosis of Psychology*. (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 231).

¹¹ Giegerich, W. "The Nuclear Bomb and the Fate of God". Op. Cit. 99. It is important in order not to misrepresent Giegerich's approach to the divinity of the bomb, to read the entire paragraph, which I include here:

"If we stick to the next best in this quite "naive" way, then we will, I assume, go down on our knees in view of the dreadful terror and the unspeakable radiance looking at us from within the nuclear bomb. Then the worship of the Golden Calf, interrupted at that time, can be concluded, but on the completely new level of the absolute that we have meanwhile arrived at. Does not God's reality, does not his dreadfulness, does not the nuclear bomb demand of us that we worship it? Is worship not the only real possibility of its propitiation? With worship I of course do not mean to approve of it, to be "for" it. I simply mean that we correspond to the actual experience in our soul by a conscious recognition of the substance of this experience. I mean that we expressly take our place in that which actually is. I mean, figuratively speaking, the dance around our Golden Calf. Can you imagine this? A mankind that dances around the bomb? A mankind whose hardening and contentiousness, whose power competition and protesting would be softened in the dance, a mankind that would swing into the "atomic" music of Being? And a bomb that would not have to be used any more, because it would be the center authorizing the dance? A bomb which as that center would bind man and by binding us would also be itself bound?"

world of appearances—all through the human recipient who is opened to these devastating and transformative energies.^{12 13}

This soul activity is not of the departed soul but of the futural soul!

Giegerich's writings offer a clue to my conclusion here in his utter refusal to share any dream of his own whatsoever with the reader, while he mercilessly tears into and intellectually benefits from many of Jung's dreams (i.e. analytically). Why doesn't he apply his psychological method to one of his own dreams? Could it be that in Jung's dreams, Jung actually reaches the devastating nuclear level of that centre, enabling him to *express* in powerful emotive language the nearly annihilating power therein?¹⁴ It appears that Giegerich's dreams do not offer Giegerich the thinker the same opportunity. His method of "true thought" which he rigorously applies to Jung's dreams and not his own, is cool, removed from the tumult of emotions, imagination, and moods. His method as he states has the ontological status of a *hobby*, having nothing to do with the necessities of our post-modern world.¹⁵ And he has been very disparaging of authors who psychologically engage our modern phenomena (he would deny that they are *soul* phenomena) with passion, imagistic thinking or emotional outbursts, as indeed Jung did:

True thought, because it is not concerned with what *we* [my italics] think, is ruthless, merciless (which is an effect of its cold, underworldly nature). Professional. What we feel and whether we welcome what it reveals and where it leads is of no significance. It is concerned with truth.¹⁶

It seems to me that there is one major obstacle within depth psychology to finding our way towards a discovery of divinity in our postmodern age. The difficulty concerns an inability within the discipline to distinguish, in experience, language as reflecting soul activity as *departed*, from language as the instrument of soul activity as *futural*, inceptively coming-to-be through that instrument—a futural psychology. The former way, focussing on the *departed* soul leads to advances in studying history of images, symbols, myths, ritual, comparative religion, shamanic studies and so on. Our culture is immeasurably enriched by these studies inaugurated by Jung's opus and used by Giegerich and others. The latter way focusses on the *futural* soul—soul activity seeking expression in the coming-to-be of works of art, poetry, literature, cultural practices in their *becoming*—in other words the *appearing* of the appearances now expresses the activity of the futural soul.¹⁷ Departed soul activity, when released by Giegerich's method of psychology is the work of reflecting consciousness, beginning with its prime matter of a finished linguistic product of the futural soul.

With this excursion into major efforts, and failures within depth psychology and other disciplines to find a way, if possible, to a postmodern version of Otto's phenomenology of the divine, I want now to show how it is possible and how a dream of "the human experience of a mysterious terror and awe, and majesty, in the presence of that which is entirely *other*" can occur and thus lead to (i.e. the dream is *futural* in character) a life of service to the divine in our postmodern "godless" world.



¹² See n. 4 and n.9

¹³ See n.4

¹⁴ As Jung does in Answer to Job for example.

¹⁵ Giegerich, W. (2012): What is Soul? (New Orleans, Spring Journal Books, 307 ff).

¹⁶ Giegerich, W. (2010): The Soul Always Thinks. (New Orleans, Spring Books Publications, 18)

¹⁷ I highly recommend a pioneering essay on futural psychology: Dreams as Angels by Russell Lockhart. Available at: <http://www.ralockhart.com/WP/dreamsasangels.pdf>

Some years ago I received the following dream:

I am wandering the streets, alone. I find myself in a hall where some ritual is going on, conducted by an older man. The participants are each undergoing a ritual which seems perfunctory—just going through the motions. It has a Masonic-Christian feel to it. We are all sitting on our knees on carpet. When the old man sees me, he suddenly becomes interested, more alive, and asks me to go through the ritual which now comes alive. There is a line on the floor. I am to touch my head on that line, i.e. submit. I do so as he intones the ritual of confessions. As I touch the floor with my head, he smiles and says warmly you are forgiven, everything. Then he comes over to me and crouches, whispering in my right ear for some time. As I listen I hear another voice, a higher pitch, unearthly. An angel is speaking to me though his speech. I have trouble understanding most of it but the angel talks for some time. When the old man finished I get up but have trouble speaking, or moving my limbs. I am trembling. My right hand begins to write automatically, I scrawl “interlocutor” on my right thigh.

Here, I submit, is a dream that shows Otto’s idea of the Holy—divinity in a form that belongs to our age of postmodernism. Divinity speaks and the human trembles but absent from the phenomenon is any metaphysical category: substance, essence, substrate, eternity... I call the “speaker” an angel but there was no appearance, image, or figure. The angel has no *thing*-like structure or substance and does not exist in space-time. Its logical status is negative. Yet in the dream I was shaken by that negative reality in the manner that Otto holds to be an experience of the Holy. The dream further suggests an intimate relationship between language (the old man speaking in my ear) and soul or *other*—the “speaking” which I call “angel”. “Angel” simply names the activity of soul reflecting itself in the *emergent* language of the old man. This “speaking”, like music, emerges from *within* the instrument (here the old man’s voice). We hear the sounding of the instrument but we *listen* to the music or the soul “speech”. When the instrument ceases, the soul has moved from its character as futural to that of departed and we have moved from becoming to having-been (memory or written word or art work).

In my dream this “angel speech” or activity of the soul penetrated my being, beyond what I could yet understand with my reflective mind. My hand began to move in participation with that activity. I “automatically” scribbled “interlocutor” on my right thigh. Futural soul activity evidently wants to come into material existence through an act of, for example, participatory writing that is yet beyond reflective understanding—in other words the futural soul manifests in the *making* of an art form!

The soul of the postmodern age is a “speaking” that needs given language (the past) in order to “say” something new. Within given language may be discerned hints of an emerging reality! New wine pouring into old bottles! For this new mode of being (let’s call it the interlocutor for now, and try not to hypostasise the name), complete submission of the habitual ego is required, followed by forgiveness, which frees given language to become a vessel or receiver for divine contents or sacred “speech” coming-to-be out of the unknown future .

In the 1980’s I experienced a vision of the Holy Grail as vessel for in-pouring divinity that has become a template for the rest of my life.¹⁸ Now with this more recent dream a further facet of that mystery is disclosed: Perhaps our given language can become, under conditions of surrender and forgiveness, an interlocutor for the potent (the right thigh in my dream) activity of soul to materialise in the world as the *within-ness* of the appearing of the appearances.

The dream began to shape and inform my waking life in quite unexpected ways. Over the years I became aware that I notice ambiguity in the speech of others, and in fact have done so since childhood,

¹⁸ See: https://www.academia.edu/37914875/RESPONSE_to_PETER_KINGSLEYS_CATAFALQUE_In_Seven_Parts

quite unconsciously. I responded to the “unsaid” in other individuals’ speech, often to my disadvantage. I remember right now when I was ten years old, I went into town to buy my step-father a birthday gift. I felt he would really like what I bought. My mother and I watched as he unwrapped the gift and to this day I remember the startled look in both my parents’ eyes as the hip flask was revealed. My step-father in fact was an alcoholic! I was ten and had no access to such a description at the time. But I had “read” the unsaid in our family and “artistically” responded.

Shocking people in this unintended manner almost always reflected badly on me since others simply were not aware of the “angel” *within* their speech “speaking” to me. Dreams such as this one above, began the process of making the inceptive activity of the futural soul more conscious as coming-to-be *within* our quotidian language. This activity of soul, again like music, is a negative reality and is found *within* the instrument of our language while it is playing, i.e. in the very act of speaking. This is where we may find the appearing of divinity today in the phenomenological sense that Rudolph Otto means.

My slow discovery of this capacity to discern soul activity *within* language, aided by such dreams and visions, led me into the only profession that putatively valorises soul activity—depth psychology. It is a marginalised cultural practice, one of a few arts that seek to manifest the unspoken, the ever-moving background to our manifest world of things, through some instrument or another: language, colour, materials of our created world, like stone or clay. This background is not already positively there, to be discovered, like a new continent. It momentarily comes into being in the manner that Derrida quotes Merleau-Ponty as saying so beautifully:

Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings which would be part of an *a priori* of the mind; rather, communication arouses these meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action. The writer’s thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself... my own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think.

Derrida adds in his own words:

It is because writing is inaugural, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future.¹⁹

We exist as the threshold between the futural soul and the departed soul, where, through our artistic participation, the “dangerous and anguishing” reality-forming futural soul, passes into death as the now departed soul.



¹⁹ Derrida, J. (1978): *Writing and Difference*. (London: Routledge, 11)