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The Neon Gods We Made

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THE NEON GODS WE MADE

Honors Project Final Draft

Written by: Max Funk

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A Preface:

Religion fascinates me. It is both toxic and bright. Destructive and healing. Truthful and full of lies. “Good” and “evil”. However defined, it is so many things at the same time, and to box the subject into any one particular view—positive, negative, neutral—would be to severely misrepresent its complexity.

I want it to be clear before reading the text to come that this collection is not *just* some critique of religion, however one chooses to define the term; I subscribe to one myself. Instead, with this project I hope to explore the links between organized religion, spirituality, and the culture(s) of the United States. I am particularly interested in the ever-dominating process that is commodification in the US (and worldwide for that matter) as it relates to religion and people’s practicing of their respective religions or modes of spirituality. Furthermore, I am interested in the ways in which religion operates as a concept, an ideology. I explore not only what religion *is*, but what it *does*.

During the process of writing this collection, I conducted a series of informal interviews with some of my friends and family; these individual’s thoughts and beliefs now populate the pages that lay ahead. Many of these people I had known for years, but I had never truly sat and discussed religion (in any sense of term) with them. Once asked, we discussed details more intimate than I would have imagined others, even those close to me, would be willing to share. We shouldn’t be afraid to talk to people about their beliefs; people generally desire an audience. Be open-minded. Be curious. Be loving. But perhaps most of all, be critical.

Terms of Agreement ("Terms")

Last updated: July 30, 95 A.D.

Please read these Terms carefully before using our religion as delineated and maintained by us.

Your access to and use of this religion is conditioned on your acceptance of and compliance with these Terms. These Terms apply to all visitors, users, and others who access or use the religion itself as well as any affiliated holy sites, relics, etc.

By accessing or using the religion you agree to be bound by these Terms. If you disagree with any part of the Terms, you may not access the religion nor the various benefits that are included (including but not limited to salvation).

Accounts

When you create an account with us, you must provide information that is accurate, complete, and current at all times. Failure to do so constitutes a breach of the Terms, which may result in immediate termination of your account from our denomination.

You are responsible for safeguarding the specifics involving your personal account with us.

You agree not to make an account with any third party. You must notify us immediately upon becoming aware of any breach in protocol regarding any unauthorized third party accounts made by you or others who have accounts with us.

Privacy Policy

When you opt in to the Confession™ feature, from time to time our officials will collect information that can be used to identify

your sins. This includes only the information that you are willing to share. This information will be stored anonymously and will not be associated with your name or account.

When you use the Confession™ feature, we will use the information you provide, as well as other gathered information, for various purposes. We may use this information and the aggregated information from other users who also opt in to this feature to:

- Create personalized penances for the sinful.
- Provide you with recommendations regarding ways to prevent sinful living.
- In the most serious of cases, aid in police investigation.

At all times, your information will be treated in accordance with our privacy policy.

Requirements For Use/Membership

Persons of any age are permitted to have an account, but persons under the age of 13 will require a parent, legal guardian, or appropriate educational institution to create the account for them. Children under the specified age need not review these Terms with their parents or legal guardians. The children will still be bound by the Terms but will have some leeway until they understand the Terms or reach the age of 13.

Accounts are currently available* to all citizens of the United States and many other locations world wide.

*Unfortunately, accounts are unavailable at this time to most persons not of traditional heterosexual orientation.

Use of Content

We reserve the right to modify the Usage Rules at any time. You agree not to violate, circumvent, question, or otherwise deface anything related to such Usage Rules for any reason—or to attempt or assist another person in doing so. Usage Rules may be changed and molded by us for convenience purposes and without notice to you. You agree not to modify the rules in any manner or form (unless otherwise convenient), or to act upon modified versions of the rules for any purpose. Violations of the Usage Rules may result in civil or divine criminal liability.

Usage Rules

- (i) You shall be authorized to use the religion as long as you respect the Terms and conditions provided.
- (ii) You shall not be entitled to use this religion while also using another.
- (iii) You shall not deface the name or values of the religion while you are an active member.
- (iv) You shall use the religion often; inactivity may justify account termination.
- (v) You shall respect other members, especially more senior account holders.
- (vi) You shall not harm others, regardless of membership.
- (vii) You shall be monogamous.
- (viii) You shall not be entitled to our property nor the property of others (regardless of membership).
- (ix) You shall be required to provide us with nothing but the truth—you are authorized to do as you please with regards to other people or institutions.
- (x) You shall not be jealous of members' or nonmembers' property (i.e. house, cars, women).

Termination

We may terminate or suspend your account immediately, without prior notice or liability, for any reason whatsoever, including without limitation if you breach the Terms.

All provisions of the Terms which by their nature should survive termination shall survive termination, including, without limitation, indemnity and limitations of liability.

Upon termination, your right to use the religion in any way (i.e. prayer, hope, bigotry) will immediately cease. If you wish to terminate your account/membership, you may simply agree to the Terms for a different religion, which will automatically terminate your membership with us.

Governing Law

These Terms shall be governed and construed in accordance with the laws of heaven, without regard to its conflict at any times with national or international laws.

Our failure to enforce any right or provision of these Terms will not be considered a waiver of those rights. If any provision of these Terms is held to be invalid or unenforceable by our heavenly father, the remaining provisions of these Terms will remain in effect. These Terms constitute the entire agreement between us regarding our religion, and supersede and replace any prior agreements we might have between us regarding said religion.

Changes

We reserve the right, at our sole discretion, to modify or replace these Terms at any time. In the rare event that a revision is made, we may or may not provide notice prior to the new Terms taking

effect. What constitutes a significant change and the appropriate notification time will be determined at our sole discretion.

By continuing to use our religion after those revisions become effective, you agree to be bound by the revised Terms. If you do not agree to the new Terms, please stop your usage of our product.

Objectionable Material

You understand that by using our religion you may frequently encounter people and ideas that are offensive, bigoted, or erroneous, and that these people and ideas may or may not be identified as such beforehand. Nevertheless, you agree to use the religion at your sole risk and we shall have no liability for the aforementioned people and ideas. Additionally, we provide prescriptions and descriptions about the world for your personal well-being, and you agree to acknowledge that we do not guarantee complete accuracy of these prescriptions and descriptions.

Waiver / Indemnity

BY USING OUR RELIGION, YOU AGREE, TO THE EXTENT PERMITTED BY BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND HOLY LAW, TO INDEMNIFY AND HOLD THE LEADERS AND OFFICIALS OF OUR RELIGION HARMLESS WITH RESPECT TO ANY CLAIMS ARISING OUT OF ANY BREACH OF CONTRACT ON YOUR PART OR ANY ACTIONS TAKEN IN OUR INVESTIGATIONS TO FIND OUT IF THERE HAS BEEN A BREACH OF CONTRACT, MEANING YOU CANNOT SUE OR RECOVER DAMAGES FROM US FOR ANY REASON OUTLINED IN THIS AGREEMENT, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO OUR DECISION TO TERMINATE YOUR ACCOUNT, CHANGE OUR TERMS WITHOUT PRIOR WARNING OR NOTICE THEREAFTER, AND RELEASING INACCURATE INFORMATION;

THIS WAIVER /INDEMNITY PROVISION APPLIES TO ALL VIOLATIONS DESCRIBED IN OR CONTEMPLATED BY THIS AGREEMENT.

Other Information

Our Terms of Agreement was created with the assistance of TermsFeed Terms of Service Generator (<https://termsfeed.com>).

Contact Us

If you have any questions about these Terms, please pray for the answers you need.

By pressing agree, you accept and agree to abide by the Terms listed above.

A dark blue, rounded rectangular button with the word "Agree" written in white, sans-serif font.

Is your holy text obsolete?

YOU BET IT IS!

Aren't you tired of flipping through the worn-out pages, lugging around such an outdated medium of communication, and needlessly wasting a copious number of trees?

Well, fret no more! Come and pay a visit to www.yourholytexts.com for free—that's right, **FREE!**

—downloads of any and all of your favorite holy works.

Do you need a quote for a billboard?

www.yourholytexts.com/bible

Do you need help impressing relatives, showing you really did pay attention in religion class?

www.yourholytexts.com/torah

Do you need to back up your unfounded hatred of Islam with a minute understanding of the religion and its teachings?

www.yourholytexts.com/qur'an

Do you need to know about a non-monotheistic religion?

www.yourholytexts.com/other

The texts you've come to know are outdated compared to the new, digital versions we can provide.

The Parting Of The Red Carpet

Many predicted the second coming of Christ, but few predicted the second coming of ancient simplicity. The Nazareth born son of God arrived at the gala late Tuesday night bearing a modest earth brown tunic with hints of dogwood (or was it pine?) colored stitching laced throughout. Underneath, he showed off skin tone, embroidered leggings that were just a little bit vintage and just a little bit obvious. As for our savior's footwear, he donned carefully tattered Khaki sandals with profoundly intricate lacework that cry inspiration from the Te Rewa Rewa Bridge in New Plymouth, New Zealand. The outfit was an almighty stroke of genius by Jesus' compatriot Renon Chean, and it serves as a very conscious pilot for his new line. If this outfit is any indication of what's to come, Chean, who is frequently touted for his ability to make fashionably restrained lines of clothing fit for everyday wear, is on the cusp of yet more success.

St. Peter's Cathedral:**Now With Quick Absolution!**

God created the world in six days. The atmosphere. The land. The creatures that populate that land. She even threw in the sun for good measure, and it only took her six days. She probably didn't work around the clock either.

Do you think she would condone spending countless boring hours every Sunday worshipping her? We think not. Chances are, she feels more offended than praised because of said blatant disregard for speed, efficiency, and effective time management.

Luckily, St. Peter's Cathedral has the answer:
speed communion.

For the first time ever, you will be able to enter church, receive the holy communion, and be on your blessed way in 15 minutes or less! We understand that with overloaded work schedules and a countless number of commitments, people simply don't have the time they once did to make meaning in their lives.

Why compromise? Why wait?
Come get your taste of Christ at St Pete's!

Located: 8th Ave., New York, NY 10022, USA

The Day I Decided To Join A Cult

Wednesday, June 24th, 2015

Dear Diary,

It's been a while since I've written to you, but today seemed like a grand enough occasion to pick the pen back up. You see, today I decided to join a cult. Jason convinced me; he lives next door. We had never talked much until today. I was out trimming the hedges, and the next thing I knew, I told Jason I'd join the cult. He said he'd talk to his grand master and get back to me. I'll keep you updated.

Your friend,

Max

The Day After I Decided To Join A Cult

Thursday, June 25th, 2015

Dear Diary,

Not much news on the the cult front today; I was hoping to hear back from them by now. Unfortunately, the basement flooded today so I've mostly been trying to deal with that. The sump pump is broken and and it might take a miracle for me to fix it at this point; it's under at least 6 inches of water by now. Until that issue gets fixed I'm putting everything that was in the basement on the back porch to dry. It's really my only option at this point, so I hope no one takes anything. Also, I just remembered I forgot to pick up milk at the store. I guess I'll go do that now.

Your pal,

Max

**The Friday Two Days After I Decided To Join A Cult And The
Day I Was Informed Of The Cult's Weekly Luncheon**

Friday, June 26th, 2015

Dear Diary,

Today the phone rang and you'll never guess who it was...it was the grand master himself! He called to personally invite me to the cult's weekly luncheon that will be held at his house this Sunday. He paused in the middle of the call and whispered, "can I ask something important of you?" Of course, I said "Of course!" He asked if I wouldn't mind bringing some potato salad; he said that his wife would really appreciate it. What a hoot that guy is. I can't wait to meet him.

Your companion,

Max

**The Saturday Three Days After I Decided To Join A Cult And
The Day Before The Cult's Weekly Luncheon**

Saturday, June 27th, 2015

Dear Diary,

Today I tried to make potato salad; needless to say, it didn't go very well. I had already boiled the potatoes, cut the celery and onion, and got out all of the condiments when I realized I forgot to hard boil the eggs. What an idiotic thing to do! But it gets worse. When I grabbed the egg carton out of the refrigerator I only grabbed the top of the carton; the bottom half swung open and the eggs fell out, only to break open once they hit the floor. It took so long to clean up. Now, I'm about to head to the store. I haven't decided whether I'm going to buy eggs or just buy pre-made potato salad yet. While I'm out, I might try to get the brakes on my car checked; they've been squeaking a bit lately. I'm not quite sure if the auto shops are open on Saturday's though. Anyway, I'll let you know how everything goes sometime tomorrow night.

Your mate,

Max

**The Very First Sunday After I Decided To Join A Cult, Which
Also Happens To Be The Day Of The Much Anticipated Weekly
Luncheon Held At The Grand Master's House**

Sunday, June 28th, 2015

Dear Diary,

What an amazing day, Diary! I have to admit, I was extremely nervous when I first arrived at the cult's weekly luncheon. To make matters worse, brother Todd and sister Lisa engaged in a very heated argument about whether we should watch the Nationals' game or the Angels' game while we ate. Thankfully, for the tranquility of the luncheon, sister Lisa won and the Angels' game was decided on. Apparently, brother Todd forgot that he had to leave the luncheon early so that he could see his son's softball game; everyone had a big laugh afterward. After the game was decided on, I grew much more comfortable. Brother Jason introduced me to so many people that I can hardly remember everyone's names. When I spoke with the grand master, he told me how excited he was that I decided to join and that he looked forward to getting to know me better. Oh, and I almost forgot, his wife really did appreciate that I brought potato salad!

Your comrade,

Brother Max

Like A Rapture

On Friday, December 21st, tragedy struck the world like never before. Both the earth and sky were torn open, leaving cities worldwide in utter ruin.

Many reports are claiming that the destruction is an event described in the Christian bible known as “The Rapture.” Acting president Biden has yet to make an official statement regarding his thoughts on the cause. Meanwhile, the FBI has launched an extensive investigation.

One eyewitness, Chelsea Jenkins, 23, witnessed the events unfold. “Oh my god, like, that was like, the scariest thing ever. I like, don’t even know how to start,” she said trying to come to terms with the events that had just unfolded.

“First, these light beams like, shot down, like, into a crowd of people. Then, like half of them were literally, like, just gone. I was like, ‘What the Hell?’ Like, why would they, like, disappear, you know?” Many reports similar to Jenkins’ continue to stream in to the news station.

“So, not long after,” Jenkins continued, “there was like, this bang. Then, like, my ears were like, ringing and fire like, raised up through the ground.”

“So then I like, ran with the crowd and like, it was like, so hectic. People were like, pushing and shoving and crying. Like no one knew what was going on, and like, Jesus Christ, I’m still shaking.”

Police officers and response teams countrywide initially struggled to gain control over the ever-worsening situation that saw society quickly dissolving into chaos. Thanks to those men and women who, brave as lions, responded to the call of duty, order was eventually restored in most areas of the country.

Despite the response teams’ god-like efforts, not everyone got away unscathed. In the U.S., there are currently over one hundred thousand reported deaths and a list of injured that has now surpassed one million. Additionally, there are millions of missing persons who seem to have disappeared into thin air. We are currently awaiting word on the apparently similar statistics worldwide.

Certainly, this tragic day will not soon be forgotten. “I like, don’t even know, like, how this could happen,” Jenkins said. “It’s like, such a terrible thing to happen to this, like, amazing country.”

**St. Peter's Cathedral:
A New And Exciting Way to Worship**

*Are you among the everyone who
thinks your church is just too boring?*

*Can't stand to sit, kneel, stand,
and sit through another bland
sermon?*

Lucky for you, we at St. Peter's
Cathedral are here to help.

Starting this Saturday at 6 pm, stop passively hearing
about Jesus Christ and start experiencing him.

Through scientific approximations of Jesus' vocal chords
—based on measurements taken during his recent
exhumation—we were able to electronically recreate our
savior's voice.

Come join us as we play Christ's voice at 124 dB so that
you can literally feel the word of god coursing through
your body.

This is a once in a lifetime experience that you
won't want to miss!

Located: 8th Ave., New York, NY 10022, USA

Bible Burning

carbon monoxide
cauterized sky
words are logs in a pile

ancient understandings
now charcoal
wisdom, harmony, peace

ashes spread
populating
kindred breezes

cheap cameras snap
thin dust
thicker smoke

death, violence, hypocrisy
stacks inhaled
fire stoked

Believe

Many people mock Beliebers, the followers of Justin Bieber. These fanboys and fangirls are said to be short sighted, blind, deaf, other terms that mock disability, ignorant, brimming with faith, deceived. Many see their pursuits as one great waste of time. They are following some idol who has yet to really deliver them anything. However, I'd like to point out that he has actually delivered.

First, he hit the ground running with *My World*. Some might argue that the album is just a collection of over-simplistic love songs. There isn't much substance. But I urge those critics to be careful jumping to conclusions too early; the boy was just discovering his greatness, as evidenced by *My World 2.0*. Don't even try to claim that "Baby," "Somebody To Love," and "U Smile" aren't incredibly catchy. With this album, we see a growing young man pour his heart out to the world. Even better, he refines these previously unpolished gems with his release of *My Worlds*.

Sure, it took him his third try before he released a truly masterful collection, but he would never look back from there. He himself says in his subsequent hit single "Never Say Never" that he has no plans to turn his back on destiny. That destiny includes changing from an adorable boy into a mostly matured young man. That destiny includes adapting his music from teen pop into something a bit more hip hop and R&B. That destiny includes selling millions of albums and winning over millions of adoring fans.

It is now important to note that Justin's influence over those millions of people hasn't been a shallow venture. One need only look at what he's done for people spiritually around the Christmas season to see his greatness. "Home For Christmas" reminds people the importance of togetherness, "All I Want For Christmas" engenders love, "Someday At Christmas" calls for world peace, "Little Drummer Boy" and "The Christmas Song" stress the importance of the traditions the holidays are built on, and "Only Thing I Ever Get For Christmas" reminds us to always be giving. Most importantly, as

a whole, *Under The Mistletoe* reminds everyone who the Christmas season is truly supposed to be about.

Next, Justin reverses the dynamic between himself and his faithful with *Believe*; he claims that he owes his success to their Belieb in him. Simply put, he lets his followers know they are loved. “Boyfriend” assures followers that Justin will always be by their side while “As Long As You Love Me” shows that his only requirement is a reciprocation of his undying love. In addition to a sensual selection of songs meant to build bonds between Beliebers and Justin, there are amazing songs such as “Beauty and A Beat” that keep the mood fun and light.

Now, cynics might say something along the lines of, “Justin shouldn’t be sanctified because of his glaring inconsistencies. Sure, he’s done some good, but look at the nonsensical lyrics in his first few albums, look at his reliance on cheesy love songs and weak metaphors, look at whatever *Journals* is. Additionally, separate from his music career, he isn’t as pure as Beliebers might think; he’s even gotten into trouble with the authorities on multiple occasions.”

To those critics I say, if nothing else, Justin has given his millions of followers *Purpose*. This album retains his trademark pop vibe, but replaces shallow lyrics with meaningful messages. For example, in “I’ll Show You,” Justin proclaims that he is human too, and that pressure affects him as it does anyone else. In “Sorry,” Justin recognizes that he has indeed made mistakes. He isn’t perfect. However, his admission of weakness shows that he has grown, matured, and is now taking responsibility. The significance of these important messages is that Justin is finally acting as a role model, leading people to accept and revel in their humanity. This album has already had and will continue having a largely positive impact on Beliebers, and non-Beliebers, alike.

But the greatness of Justin Bieber extends well beyond him as a musician, or even as a man; he has become much more than that now. He is a symbol, an icon. He brings people together. A massive community of love, togetherness, and devotion exist as a result of

that iconic status. He has brought millions of adoring fans en masse, regardless of whether they congregate online or at a sold-out Madison Square Garden. Because of the sheer size of this community, it is now incredibly easy to find Justin related paraphernalia and assorted artifacts. Incredibly, these shirts, wrist bands, and photographs bring joy and fulfillment into the lives of the ever-so-devoted community. Simply put, the culture and lifestyle associated with Beliebing is remarkably beneficial for the followers. Furthermore, this Belieber culture is more intricate—not to mention important—than many could possibly imagine.

~ ~ ~

Unfortunately, I find it hard to Belieb. To be clear, as evidenced by a rather hefty amount of praise I have bestowed upon him, I believe Justin is an incredibly talented singer. However, to be a Belieber is to Belieb that Justin continuously performs miracles of sound on stage. And yes, he is great live; but, much of his best work comes in the studio, where sound crews and editors can piece together a finished product that *seems* miraculous. Simply put, he is a different man in the studio than he is live. Again, this distinction wasn't made to discredit the man; he is still profoundly important and incredibly talented, even without his studio magic.

Truly, following Justin is a worth-while venture. I see why throngs of people follow him. Hell, I envy Beliebers. I would like to be one. I really would. Unbounded faith aimlessly directed in whatever direction Justin Bieber is touring that week, whatever random direction brought the most meaning to my life, would probably make me a happier and more satisfied person. Still, I don't see why I should limit myself to Justin and his comparatively narrow set of songs when there are millions of other works out there for me to explore. As a non-Belieber I can enjoy and hear messages from all of the great artists worldwide while also listening to songs written by Justin, which stands as a stark contrast to the restricted, narrow view of music I would have were I to focus solely on Justin.

I suppose that what I'm really trying to say here is that I like Justin
—how could one not?—but he simply isn't *that* special.

The Amazing Atheist

Characters:

The Caller

The Caller/Barker at a circus; his job is to attract circus-goers to a newly opened exhibit: “The Amazing Atheist”. He is 45 years old, has disheveled, short hair, half of his face is—somewhat poorly—painted like a clown, and he is about 5’4”. Everything about him is exaggerated and showy; his speech, movements, and expressions should feel more surreal and uncomfortable than natural.

Elleander

A soloist dancer/performer at the circus. She is in her early 20s and about 5’5” or 5’6”. She wears dark purple lip stick, has black painted circles surrounding her eyes (almost like a superhero mask), and vibrant polka dots cover her face. Her movements should be dreamlike: fluid, smooth, and athletic. Her speech sounds like a combination of a lofty intellectual and a 90s punk-rock diva. Like The Caller, her conglomeration of speech, movements, and expressions should create an unnatural/unrealistic feel.

Circus-goer 1

Boisterous and confused, but still confident. Speech sounds labored.

Circus-goer 2

Accusatory and confrontational. Speaks with their head slightly tilted back and chest puffed; stiff. Vague New York accent.

Circus-goers/Chorus

Author’s note:

Punctuation indicates how a line is being said.

A “/” marks a point of interruption.

Flush white overhead lighting. The lighting is more subtle at the beginning and increases in potency throughout the course of the play. By the end, the flush light is overwhelming.

The scene is a Vaudeville-esque stage, elevated about 3-5 feet, outside of a sparkling theater. The elevated stage takes up about a third of the stage starting from upstage left. The elevated stage is slanted so as to face equally the remainder of the stage and the audience. Above the elevated stage is the theater's marquee. It is surrounded by alternating red and white lights and contains the message: COME SEE THE AMAZING ATHEIST.

Around the stage is gathered a crowd of circus goers of anywhere from 5 to 15 people, among them Circus-goer 1 and Circus-goer 2. All are dressed in dull, earthy colors; their clothes appear worn and dirty, but not ragged. Throughout the play, the Circus-goers (except for Circus-goer 1 and Circus-goer 2 when prompted) are silent bar occasional coughs and/or sneezes. They are to appear relatively disinterested in the spectacle taking place before them.

Throughout, some circus goers leave and others arrive. The actors, and even clothing, can be the same for coming and going circus goers. By the final lines, all circus goers except for Circus-goer 1 and Circus-goer 2 are off stage.

On the elevated stage stands a caller/barker dressed in clown style, red pin-stripe pants. He wears an off brown, corduroy jacket and a crooked red tie that is not quite matching the pin-stripes on his pants. His undershirt is greased as though it was recently used as an apron. Initially, The Caller is illuminated by a neon red spotlight. It is bright, but not overpowering.

After The Caller's initial dialogue, Elleander slowly makes her way to the front of the crowd. She wears a flashy dance outfit. The right side of the outfit is a tight, robin's egg, suede suit and the left side is a bright red, flowing dress; the mashup resembles outfits worn by

Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven. She wears a crooked headband, ill-fitting glasses, and feathers are stitched randomly on the outfit.

Caller (*with cheerful gusto, moving about the elevated stage energetically*): Come one come all, welcome from near and far. Step right up and see “The Amazing Atheist!” The act is just about to begin and you *don’t* want to be the one to miss this performance. Yes, come inside and see the live, I repeat, LIVE performance. “The Amazing Atheist” will be like...

Elleander (*snaking from the back of the crowd to the front*): Pardon me!

Caller (*without stopping at interruption*): ...nothing you’ve seen before. Come and watch the man who is superior in mind to all of us mere mortals,...

Elleander: Sir!

Caller (*without stopping at interruption*): ...come and watch the man with no religion (*pauses to take drink, gestures as if to say, “go ahead”*).

Elleander: Isn’t atheism a religion?

Caller (*Beat. With menace*): Excuse me?

Elleander (*mocking*): I mean, it has “-ism” at the end doesn’t it?

Caller (*spitefully*): No, *silly girl*, Atheism is what it means to have no religion... (*Beat. With cheerful gusto, moving frantically about the stage; should be out of breath by the end*) The Amazing Atheist is a man of science! He is a man ahead of our time! (*stops to face the crowd before resuming his frantic motion*) And, for the low price of \$1, any of you can come inside and watch this man show off his

talents. *(jumping)* Watch him tear apart a society rampant with dependence on religion using only his logic. *(jumping)* Watch him prove how pointless prayer is. *(jumping)* Watch him laugh at those who use religion as a crutch to bare our meaningless existence. *(jumping)* Watch this fantastic man confirm once and for all that god doesn't exist! I promise you all, this is an experience that you won't soon forget. "But how," you ask, "can this man of science do all of those amazing things?"

Elleander *(mocking, almost sounds concerned about his lack of understanding)*: Sir, I really am sorry to interrupt again, but isn't science just another religion too?

The neon red spotlight very slowly fades out.

Caller *(condescending)*: Sorry everyone, I think this girl is lost and confused. Did you lose your parents? Or better yet, did they lose you?

Elleander *(Beat. Slowly, with force)*: Aren't atheism and science belief systems?

Caller *(leaning almost comically back)*: Ha! Ha! *(playfully addressing the circus goers)* How do all of you feel about this nonsense?

The Circus-goers do not react.

Elleander: Both atheism and science have assumptions and beliefs that the followers are obligated to believe in order to be a part of the system, right? *(She turns now to face the circus goers. She is still. The circus goers move quickly back as though there were a sudden explosion, creating a semi-circle of space between them and Elleander)* These assumptions are unproven but provide

explanation about how the world works and how we should live our lives, and that's pretty much the basis of religion, right?

Caller (*sarcastic*): You wouldn't happen to have an example would you?

Elleander: Creation. (*As she talks, she moves confrontationally at individual circus goers. They move away to maintain a few yards distance as if she were oil in a bowl of water*). How did the world start? Science says a big bang, atheism says that or random chance...or...whatever else. (*ferociously crescendos*) How are those any more factual than saying some god or group of gods started it all? They don't know. It's all about faith and belief even in the "fact" based systems of belief!

Caller (*Beat.*): Hmm...Creation doesn't *really* matter I suppose. (*Beat. Addressing the circus goers, smiling uncomfortably throughout*) AND, I think if you, or anyone else here, bought a ticket to see The Amazing Atheist, you would beg to differ! (*Stops, leans forward slowly, playfully winks. Continues while frantically pacing the stage*). He can use his special power of logic to do almost anything, unlike all of those irrational, faith based religion-havers, The Amazing Atheist can use reason to deduce truths about life and the universe. Don't believe me? Tickets are only \$1! "But how," you ask, "did this man become so skilled in the art of logic?" Well, The Amazing Atheist has read the complete works of (*crescendos into a scream by the time Russell is mentioned*) Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Marx, Engels, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Schopenhauer, Foucault, Russell, Stirner, and many many many more. (*spitting, angry, shaking*) He can use any phrase these men have ever written to bolster his arguments. (*Beat.*) What do you have to say to that? (*panting heavily*)

Elleander (*cooly after a moment*): I have a few rebuttals if you don't mind.

Caller (*sashays to the side of the elevated stage, grabs a decrepit stool with peeling red paint from under, places it stage right on elevated stage, sits facing Elleander, crosses one leg over the other. This takes a fair amount of time*): Well?

Elleander (*leaping onto the elevated stage*): First, logic isn't the same as truth or fact.

Caller: But logic leads to truth, does it not?

Elleander: It certainly can—if you believe there is an obtainable truth— but again, they are not perfectly synonymous. Using logic to prove something often leads to overly theoretical answers, which, by definition, can not be some objective fact.

By this point, Circus-goer 1 and Circus-goer 2 are in front of the elevated stage, staggered so that Circus-goer 2 is slightly farther from the elevated stage than Circus-goer 1. Both stand as part of the crowd and are not too close to each other.

Caller (*crossing arms*): Okay, sure, but—

Circus-goer 2: —Hey, Lady!

Elleander lifts a sideways, open palm like a religious figure indicating Circus-goer 2's turn to speak.

Circus-goer 2 (*face scrunched as if looking into the sun*): What the hell are you talking about?

Elleander (*As if giving a lecture to a large class. Speech sounds more curt and formal. Stiff/still; hand gestures sweep outward as if gently shooing flies*): Hmmm, for example, let's look at Sartre, who's philosophy can be crudely summed up to be atheistic

existentialism. (*Circus-goer 1's hand shoots up. Elleander nods rapidly, the hand lowers*) Really, he starts with the idea that existence precedes essence (*Circus-goer 1's hand shoots up. Elleander nods rapidly, the hand lowers*), or, the idea of existence. (*Beat.*) God cannot exist if there is no pre-set human blueprint. Stemming from these points, Sartre claims, alongside scores of other existentialists, that (*with slow emphasis*) *man* is the combined result of (*with slower emphasis*) *his* actions. (*Circus-goer 1's hand shoots up. Elleander nods rapidly, the hand lowers*) Meaning for individuals is forged out of the actions and choices made by those individuals, not by some predetermined settings imposed by some god. Then, because meaning is made by humans, Sartre urges people to set forth and make that meaning. Contribute to society, better one's self, etc., because these are the things that can build meaning.

Caller (*Beat.*): So what's your point? His arguments work. If there is no god, then there cannot be someone designing humans, which means we humans are entirely responsible for our actions. (*as if making a discovery, proud*) In a sense, we "design" ourselves.

Elleander (*maintaining professor-like air*): Okay, but let's, just for a second, look back at where he started. Why does existence precede essence? Sartre comes to this conclusion based on certain observations he made regarding human nature. In other words, because he says it does. (*Beat.*) If existence precedes essence, god cannot exist—or maybe god doesn't exist, thus, existence precedes essence. Either way, there's no proof!

Circus-goer 1 (*slow, labored*): Wait a second! ...So Sartre's argument is that god doesn't exist? ...And that's it? ...We should just figure out what to do from there?

Elleander (*speaks more rapidly than before*): To be fair, he gives it a try. But, one cannot *prove* god doesn't exist. One cannot *prove*

certain human nature conjectures—one can try, but there will never be enough evidence to come to an answer that supports an *evidence-based approach* to problem solving. (*Beat.*) All arguments, Sartre’s included, that use *infallible* logic only work if the assumptions work. These assumptions are exactly like those of any belief system. There may be reason to believe these assumptions, but there is no way these reasons can be universally correct or applicable, especially in a system like atheism that says nothing can be objectively absolute.

Caller (*begins to speak, but words don’t come out, only a muttering/coughing jumble of noise*): ...

Elleander (*Begins moving about the stage: half pacing, half dancing, incredibly fluid. Everyone else stands mesmerized, as if in a daze. Speech is now more flowing and dreamy, like a poet performing at an open-mic-night in some underground jazz bar. Passionate*): This “Amazing Atheist” guy is not better than everyone else just because he read (*crudely imitating in motion and speech the rising, spitting anger from The Caller earlier*) Nietzsche or Sartre or Camus or Marx or Schopenhauer or Foucault or Russell or Stirner, (*returning to the fluid speech and movement; increasingly passionate throughout*) or the works of any other white, European male for that matter. (*Beat.*) Congratulations to him for being well read, but really, if one only reads arguments that bolster their own world view, are they really that amazing? How is reading Sartre’s complete works any different than reading the Bible? Both explain how the world starts. Both explain the human condition. Both explain the point of human existence, including but not limited to what gives life meaning. Both give prescriptive arguments regarding how people should live their lives and treat others. (*Beat. Bursting with passion*) Atheism is a religion. Existentialism is a religion. Atheistic existentialism is a religion.

Elleander slides center elevated stage. She waits 15 seconds or so, growing under others' gazes, and then bows and curtsies simultaneously. Some circus-goers tilt their heads or violently scratch at their hair, but don't make much of a reaction otherwise. One claps. One or two casually exit the stage.

Caller (*Beat. High pitched. In the following dialogue the first word of each phrase is elongated and the rest of the clause is spoken rapidly*): Okay, *maybe* you have a point about Atheism, *maybe* it is actually a system of beliefs and values that, *if* looked at from a specific perspective, *could possibly* be viewed as some form of what people might occasionally refer to as "religion"; (*Beat. Condescending*) after all, it does end in "-ism." (*with cheerful gusto*) But, one thing you are not understanding, (*quietly little girl, with cheerful gusto*) is that science and Atheism are different. You see, the great thing about science is that it's true whether you (*mocking*) *believe* in it or not. Maybe Atheism has as many unfounded beliefs as other religions, but there is no denying the truth that is science.

Elleander (*feigning confusion*): No denying?

Caller (*slowly, with force*): You heard me.

Elleander (*biting*): But isn't that kind of the point of science?

Caller: What? Denying?

Elleander: Yea.

Caller: Denying what?

Elleander: Pretty much everything.

Caller (*Beat.*): But the Amazing Atheist says that science can be used to come to the cold, hard truth.

Elleander: He said that?

Caller (*softly, as if hurt*): Yes.

Elleander: Cold. Hard. Truth.

Caller: Exactly that.

Circus-goer 1 (*raising arm, half shouting*): Isn't that a tad ambiguous?

Caller: I suppose it—

Circus-goer 2 (*irked*): —“Truth” sounds like a word one of those dirty religion-havers would use, doesn't it?

Caller: Well, to be—

Circus-goer 2: Out with it!

Circus-goer 1:What are you getting at?

Caller: Listen, I—

Elleander (*playfully addressing the crowd*): Ambiguous? Yes. Religious? Yes.

The Caller slowly steps stage right of the elevated stage, terrified as a subtle neon red spotlight encircles Elleander and the white fluorescent lighting increases in intensity. She stares nonchalantly at him and gestures for him to vacate the stage. Almost shaking, he climbs slowly and clumsily off the elevated stage, as if into a cold swimming pool. This takes an awkward amount of time, despite the

elevated stage being a short height. No one else moves. Once down, he gestures toward the stage emphatically.

Elleander (*Beat. With cheerful gusto, moving about the stage increasingly like The Caller, but still more fluid*): IF we use science to *find* some greater truth, wouldn't that presuppose that the greater truth exists? (*Beat.*) Science as a discipline wasn't created to find some greater truth or a set of finalized answers about the natural world. The whole point of science is for people to come to tentative answers for generally unanswerable questions; science is a process that leads to answers that are *correct* in the sense that they explain things in the way that makes the most sense at the moment, but by definition, could not possibly be some definite answer. There is a certain lack of certainty that is supposed to be built into the scientific process, (*Beat.*) which is just that, a process, one of doubt and inquiry. By assuming that science is some undeniable truth, one would be undercutting most of the principles that science actually stands for.

Circus-goer 1: So science is a religion when it is regarded as undeniable truth because (*a slight pause*) the various assumptions that must be made in order to believe?

Elleander: I suppose, yes.

Circus-goer 2: But there's a distinction here, right?

Elleander: Between?

Circus-goer 2: (*spitefully*) Pseudo-science and (*pridefully*) true science. The faulty (*spitefully*) truth seeking science versus (*with gusto*) the questioning, denying, methodological, non-absolutist science.

Elleander (*condescending*): Ohhhh. No.

Circus-goer 2: But surely true science isn't a religion!

Elleander (*squatting a bit as if trying to speak at eye level*): Nice try, but the ideal form of science isn't any less of a religion than the more stylized version. Science, like all religions, is a narrative. It tells a story from creation, to now, to what the future will probably look like. (*Beat. Stands tall*) This story includes how and why everything has happened the way it has as well as the way it will. While much of this story is *true* or *factual*, there are gaps interspersed with conjecture.

Circus-goer 1: Conjecture?

Elleander: Maybe myth might be a better word. Yes. Myth.

Circus-goer 1: But science isn't mythic...is it?

Elleander : There is a fair amount of the past and present that humans don't know about and can never know about; of course, these unknowable phenomena are estimated in a very carefully calculated sort of way...(*Beat. Sits gracefully on the edge of the stage*) They then become pseudo-facts; they *might as well be true*. People believe this uncertain knowledge as though it were fact. For example, much of what humans know of past conditions of the earth comes from the studying of chemical isotopes. However, these isotopes have tens to hundreds to thousands of years of uncertainty. Again, this uncertainty isn't necessarily bad. It's certainly the most *reasonable* information we can obtain, but it means that the gaps in knowledge must be filled in a way that can only be described as mythic.

Caller (*from somewhere in the crowd*): Just because science doesn't have all of the answers doesn't mean it can't guess at what

it doesn't know. As long as people recognize the uncertainty of the process, the guesses—

Elleander: —Calculated estimations.

Caller: ...or estimations if you prefer...science isn't as mythic.

Elleander (*surprised*): That's a good point.

Caller (*equally surprised*): Really?

The neon red spotlight very slowly fades out. The Caller makes his way back to the stage. He climbs up quicker than he exited, but still with enormous effort.

Elleander: Yes. It is primarily when people take these uncertainties as truths that science's mythic nature is comparable to a religion's. (*Beat.*) That is not to say that there aren't still myths embedded into the narrative. All narratives are mythic in some way, especially grand narratives, which arguably, science as an ideologic framework is.

Caller (*pacing slowly, energy drained*): So, you would say science as a discipline is primarily religious in its status as a story, as a way of seeing that is not entirely *true* that influences people's thoughts and behaviors in particular ways. And more so, that people tend to buy into that story as though it were unquestionable fact?

Elleander (*Beat.*): The religious nature of science extends much further than the story it is telling; science is a belief system that rests on certain assumptions that people...well...assume to be true despite the existence of a wide variety of available assumptions. (*Beat.*) For science to make sense one must first have certain beliefs about how the world works.

Circus-goer 2: But what would those even be?

Elleander (*with immense gravity*): Most importantly, to buy into the religion that is science, one must believe that everything has a meaning, a purpose. Not in the metaphysical purpose sense, but more in the sense that all events have natural causes. If a ball falls from your hand, there is a reason. If ice is hard to walk on, there is a reason. Everything has a cause, a reason for happening.

Circus-goer 1: What about all that science (*a slight pause*) can't explain?

Elleander (*as if in a day-dream*): The assumption is that if we don't know how or why something happens now, we can eventually figure it out. We just can't explain the phenomenon *yet*.

Circus-goer 2 (*frustrated*): That sounds just like when religion-havers say "god works in mysterious ways"!

Circus-goer 1 (*frustrated*): Or "god has a plan"!

The remainder of circus goers, except for Circus-goer 1 & 2, appear somewhat frustrated or annoyed and start, not all at once, but instead 1 or 2 at a time, making their way off stage.

Elleander (*with a sigh*): It should. (*Beat.*) The idea that nature has meaning and further, that we can understand that meaning is not self evident. But, they are taken as givens in the grander scheme of the scientific discourse.

Caller (*sits gently by Elleander's side, softly*): Is there anything else that one needs to believe to buy into science as a discourse?

Elleander (*as if an afterthought, bored of the conversation*): I mentioned earlier that science seeks to find mini-truths, or

changeable understandings of the world. Generally, followers of science tend to agree that logic and observation are the best ways to determine these mini or tentative truths. However, there are arguments to be made about, say, faith as a better framework within which to understand the world than logic.

Caller (*attempting cheerful gusto but falling flat, a hint of desperation*): Reason! Logic is the tool that can bring us closest to a true understanding of the world.

Elleander (*laughs to self for a moment, almost falling from stage*): There you go again; “true understanding?” Obviously, good arguments can be made for both. (*Beat.*) But science is only better than, say, Christianity, if logic is indeed a better way of approaching and understanding the world than faith. There’s no fixed rule about the lens through which the world should be understood. (*Beat.*) The whole valuation of questioning and desire for tentative answers, the belief system that is science, rests on assumptions that aren’t necessarily *true*. Even the quest for knowledge isn’t in and of itself a good thing.

The white lighting becomes oppressive; it should be difficult to make out individual’s faces on stage. An increasingly obnoxious high frequency noise is played. The Caller squints his eyes and winces in pain from the sound. No one else reacts to the change, they just look on at The Caller.

Caller (*descending into a near mumble*): So...science tells us what to believe without being 100% truthful, it tells us how to look at the world, and rests on assumptions that are eerily comparable to the shaky assumptions most religions rest on...

Elleander (*as if she didn’t hear anything The Caller said*): That sounds about right.

Caller: ...

Elleander: ...

Caller (*with sad desperation, almost crying, still struggling from the noise/light*): Is anyone still interested in the Amazing Atheist?

Lights and high frequency immediately cut. Black.

Idol Talk

Over centuries, the grey clouds that have amassed in the minds of the people, my people, now percolate through the very holes they leave in each other. The miasma of anguish and heartbreak flows ferociously through the once blue skies, washing away the painted dreams that nature once provided. The water is brown. The grass is brown. Even death has rusted brown, rotting away in—

Okay, I'll ask again, what brought you in here today?

Har Hermon cries icy tears as it observes the horrors that have befallen the chosen ones; it cannot help but turn its glance toward Damascus—not that such an action brings much relief—as the debts are supposedly repaid to the Bank. Generations' worth of screams echo through war-torn bodies, shaking their foundations more than any weapon ever could. What's left is but a—

Yahweh, we talked about this last time; people have a hard time understanding you when you're constantly speaking in abstractions.

You're right. I apologize, Dr. Chaudrey.

Please go on.

The crushing weight of billions' dreams, desires, demands—sorry. I simply want to say that I deal with an infinitely vast amount of pressure, which is only exacerbated by the fact that people seem to have stopped believing in me. I try my best. I really do.

Name Your Price

Characters:

Kari Dreu—game show host

Georgia Silver—deep voiced announcer, offstage

James Bishop—contestant

Contestant 1

Contestant 2

Contestant 3

Ana—backstage aid

~~~

*A game show with a live studio audience. The theater-goers act as stand ins for the studio audience. There should be four seats scattered throughout the theater reserved for James Bishop, Contestant 1, 2, and 3 to sit in at the beginning of the show.*

*The walls of the studio are near vomit inducingly bright, almost as if a rainbow of crayons were melted onto the wall. Stage left and right sit large cameras pointed at center stage. Stage right are 4 small podiums facing diagonally so as to face the studio audience as well as the other half of the stage. Each podium displays a unique, obnoxious color. Stage left is a larger table with wheels.*

*On comes the overblown and childish theme song full of loud trumpets and a coffee shop style, jazzy baseline. Simultaneously, Ana runs on stage in black sweats/tights, a long sleeve black shirt, and a head set. She holds a sign that says “APPLAUSE” and encourages the audience to cheer; she does so until Georgia begins speaking. She then runs off stage. A few seconds after the music starts, Georgia, through a loudspeaker from offstage, begins speaking in a deep tone.*

**Georgia:** ...Aaaaaaaand welcome everyone! From the Barbara Parker studio here in sunny Hollywood, California, it's Name! Your! Price!

*When the contestant's names are called, they massively overreact. They jump manically, wave arms, even cry. Contestants 1, 2, and 3*

*wear kooky clothes. James wears an ugly Christmas sweater with a deer. All contestants have large, blocky name tags with their respective names in bold. Additionally, the contestants constantly smile. There should be enough time in between the time each contestant is called for them to react and start heading up to the stage before the next name is called. Ana stands downstage of the cameras with the applause sign, encouraging clapping/cheering.*

**Georgia:** Now, Contestant number 1, bring yourself up to the stage! Contestant 2, bring yourself up to the stage! Contestant 3, bring yourself up to the stage! James Bishop, bring yourself up to the stage!

*Once all of the contestants are behind their respective podiums— James should be on either the near or far podium—Kari walks out into the middle of the stage. She wears a full black suit with a red checkered tie. Her glasses are ridiculously large. She never stops smiling and speaks as though nothing bad has ever happened. The music cuts out sloppily mid note.*

**Kari:** Please, please. Thank you, everyone. You're all too kind.

*Ana darts off-stage.*

**Kari:** All right folks, let's get a look at the next prize up for bid.

*Ana runs out awkwardly with the large bundle of items. She sets up the prayer table: lays down the cloth, sets up candles and incense, lights them, sets up pictures and statues, and sprinkles flower pedals sarcastically on her way out. Silence and no movement from others while she does so. Georgia should start once Ana is almost finished.*

**Georgia:** Everyone get excited, because the next prize is a Buddhist prayer set from SSPEEX, a better home and garden! Are you looking to finally put those finishing touches on your drab room of worship? Now you can! This set comes complete with cloth, candles, incense, flower pedals, an offerings bowl, as well as a

carved, wooden statue of the Buddha himself! The closest to guessing the price without going over wins this lovely set and gets a chance to play for yet more prizes.

**Kari:** You heard her! Guess as close as you can to the actual price of this beautiful set, courtesy of SSPEEX, without going over, for your chance to continue playing! Well, it only seems fitting that you go first, Contestant 1.

**Contestant 1** (*offended*): Ummm, okay? How about \$35?

**Kari:** Okay, great! What about you Contestant 2?

**Contestant 2** (*excited*): I'll go with \$10!

**Kari:** \$10? Interesting. Now to you, Contestant 3.

**Contestant 3** (*nervous*): How about \$50, Kari!

**Kari:** I'm loving the enthusiasm! That just leaves you, James.

**James:** \$51?

**Kari:** Wow! That was absolutely ruthless! It looks like the actual price is \$54.61, so congratulations to James. Why don't you walk over here and we can play the next game.

*Same music as before while James dances to center stage where Kari stands. Contestants 1, 2, 3 and Kari clap with the music, but out of sync with each other. Ana runs out, drags the table of items off stage.*

**Kari:** Georgia, what will James be playing for today?

**Georgia:** James, we'd like you to have an all-expenses-paid journey to the beautiful city of Mecca! You and the spiritual guest of your choice will fly first class to Mecca, Saudi Arabia for a one week stay at the Hillont Inn, which features a prime location in the

accident-free center of the beautiful metropolis, a beautiful pool, and two free meals per day.

**Kari:** That certainly is worth playing for. James, what do you think?

**James:** Yea! It sounds/

**Kari:** /So, the game you will be playing is called “higher or lower?” It works like this: first, we’ll show you five items. Then, all you have to do is pick the four items with the lowest retail price. Pretty simple right? Georgia, let’s hear about those items!

*As Georgia introduces the items, Ana brings them out one by one. She brings a small stand and the item. When she places the stands, they are close to being in a straight line, but are visibly off the mark. Despite rushing, she cannot quite keep up with the pace of the announcer.*

**Georgia:** You got it, Kari! First up we have an omamori. This little amulet is a blessed, Shinto good luck charm that can help keep you protected when you need it most. Next we have a custom, white satin yarmulke, complete with gold stitching around the edges. For more information about designer yarmulkes, visit our friends at [customkippahs.com](http://customkippahs.com)! Next in line is a rope necklace with a beautiful Ganesha metal pendent; stunning isn’t it? Then, a box of Chlew’s delicious fruit snacks. Chlew's made the perfect fat free snack that you can take on the go and enjoy anytime, anywhere. Finally, a bottle of holy water straight from the famous Jordan River! What a lovely set of prizes we have today.

*Everyone stares at Ana as she rushes to finish; she eventually does so.*

**Kari:** Great, thank you, Georgia. Now, James, since we have everything out in front of us, what will your choices be?

*After each correct answer, Ana runs out to grab the item and the stand, and then runs off stage. The dialogue moves on independently of Ana; they don't wait for each item to be removed.*

**James:** Well...I think the Ganesha necklace is the most expensive, so I'm going to rule that out now.

**Kari:** Good choice! The necklace is the most expensive item at \$15.99.

**James:** Phew! Next...the two cheapest items have to be the holy water and the fruit snacks.

**Kari:** Are you positive?

**James:** Positive!

**Kari:** Correct! They are \$5.43 and \$3.99 respectively. With only two options remaining, James, which is the cheapest?

**James:** Wow, this is tough. I'm not one hundred percent sure, but my gut tells me the omamori is more expensive. So, I guess I'll go with the yarmulke as the cheaper item?

*A red light turns on, a buzzer noise is heard, and a sad tuba riff plays. James drops to his knees.*

**Kari:** Oh, James. I'm so sorry. The custom yarmulke is \$12.50 and the omamori is only \$7.99. Hey, maybe you'll have better luck making the pilgrimage next year!

*Same music plays softly. Lights dim, still red. Kari barely visible.*

**Kari (excited, with some malice):** Thanks for joining us today everyone! And don't forget to vaccinate your children to help stop the spread of infectious diseases!

*Black. Music continues playing until audience exits the theater.*

**Best Buy (Black Friday)**

Hungry is the human who must wait for salvation!  
Hungry, I am now? Always?  
Hungry crowds wait.

in line for anything! that can quell their  
hunger/appetite.  
Famished feet shuffle forward in unison  
empty toward empty promises!  
of fulfillment  
Hungry people will do  
for what?  
Hunger advances the line step after step, after step after  
step after step after; step.  
Hunger strikes, and bites, compels—  
Hunger strikes  
again

**St. Peter's Cathedral:  
Now With A Gift Shop!**

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We here at St. Peter's Cathedral are excited to announce the opening of the St. Peter's Cathedral Gift Shop®. Come peruse our vast selection of affordable rosaries, crosses, pictures with the likeness of St. Peter, postcards with the historic and picturesque St. Peter's Cathedral, and much much more!

All you need to do is head across the street from St. Peter's Cathedral in historic downtown New York City [8th Ave., New York, NY 10022] for merchandise you won't find anywhere else, at sacrilegiously low prices.

**this is a poem where the dog dies at the end**

the Man. woke up  
took good care to kick his shit eating dog  
directly in its jagged rib cage  
the resulting yelp gave the Man a  
weak  
but still impressive  
erection  
the Man then went about his multi-step morning  
routine  
ingurgitate heap of dripping  
pig flesh with a handful of antacids  
watch news  
cover bulging stomach with blotched  
greasy butcher apron  
head to work

the old bitch lumbered over to the window  
to watch the small car pull away  
her gut rumbled  
she could not  
remember when she last ate  
feeling weak she made her way to the kitchen

upon return  
the Man gave the dog another swift kick to its ribs  
just for good measure  
the Man went to grab a beer from the fridge  
only to find bags upon bags of food  
empty  
strewn about the Man's sty of a kitchen

the vein that interrupted the Man's forehead  
pulsed with his waxy cholesterol-filled broth  
an uncomfortable amount of slobber writhed  
its way over the knots in the Man's beard  
between the intermittent twitches of the mouth

the Man managed to stutter  
y-y-y-you l-l-l-little f-f-f-fuck

the Man grabbed the first glass in sight  
shattered it over the bitches pleading face  
now angered  
by the  
blood  
stains that entrenched the carpet  
the blitzkrieg continued

the hammer dug into her back  
the Man wanted it to know what it had done  
the blows rained down like acid onto this withering  
heap of dripping creature  
the Man turned the hammer around  
looked into her eyes

## Doves

There's something hauntingly off-putting about watching doves peck and claw one another to death. Watching eyeballs being gouged out of their respective sockets. Watching wings being torn apart in a frenzy of soft feathers and blood. Watching beaks shatter under heavy strain. Watching the winner, olive branch in tow, lurch into the murky blue sky with all of the grace of a thrown fish.

The eery discomfort comes from the deconstruction of the dove as a symbol, an ideal. Take for example religious killings: shocking, disgusting, terrifying, abhorrent. But why do people react so strongly to religious killings as opposed to more run of the mill murders?

Religion is an ideal, an ideal that couldn't possibly perpetuate actions such a murder, because by definition, it would no longer be that ideal. It's bad enough that so many are dying; adding religion to the mixture doesn't feel right. But why?

Viewing religion as an enabler of death is uncomfortable because it serves as the point of breakdown, the moment an ideal is deconstructed. Religion cannot be involved in killing because religion is an ideal, and by definition, cannot be anything but the ideal it supposedly represents. This reasoning, this symbolic status, is why the church can do no wrong. Any deviation from the ideal is written off as an anomaly, one that could not possibly be associated with the church, the symbol, the ideal.

Take for example the disturbingly large number of cases dealing with children being molested by clergymen of the Catholic church. Did the church endorse those behaviors? Of course not. But did the church's leaders perpetuate a system that allowed such criminal actions to occur? Many would claim that these isolated individuals acted according to their own perverse morals and have nothing to do with the church or its teachings. Again, it would be damnable to claim that Catholicism's teachings say that such deplorable actions are acceptable in any way. However, these men were and are ranked members of the system that is the Catholic church. Furthermore, these incidents are far from isolated; there is enough of a trend for there to be a clear systemic problem, a problem that the church is at least tacitly responsible for.

The Catholic church being at some level responsible for children being molested is an uncomfortable thought. There is a certain cognitive

dissonance that is created as the church, the symbol, crumbles. In its symbolic status, the church is good, a vessel for good or an educator to the masses of what is good. Certainly, it can serve both of those roles and many more. But because the church has become synonymous with good, by definition, it cannot be bad, cannot do wrong.

The problem with symbols, though, is that they can be misrepresentations, regardless of how much we want them not to be. Religion should not be associated with murder. Churches shouldn't allow, systemically, the abuse of children. Doves, the harbingers of peace and tranquility, should not be dismembering other doves. But in reality, it is only the idealized dove that cannot rip another apart over a scrap of soft pretzel.

## The Neon Gods We Made

I wake up and can't help but smile  
when I turn on the television. I see evangelic  
preachers review all the rules I need for salvation:  
false starts, offsides, and foul balls.

Above the television hangs a black and white poster.  
It depicts my savior with his arms outstretched  
as if to say, "You are always welcome here, my child."  
The center of his chest boasts an angelic #23.

Lately, it seems like there are many more nay-sayers  
that feel the need to voice their discontent  
with the gods that I have come to know and love.  
"They are dishonest," they say. "Rapists" and "abusers."

But what of the Greek gods? Zeus killed his father,  
slept around, and even consumed his first wife.  
Yet, he is the most revered of them all. His flaws  
made him more human, more accessible.

We worship gods because they are better versions  
of ourselves, who we want to be. But who's to say  
there is actually a perfect version out there? Why not  
worship our imperfections, those which make us human?

People are scared. Too distracted to see who we really are.

Next to my television sits a computer with one open window.  
On it, I see the holy trinity that is my fantasy football offense,  
defense, and special teams. I say a special prayer to these players:  
"Please play well," I want to feel good inside if not for a moment.

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## What Gets Me Through

Life is agonizing. And regardless of its accuracy, religion helps. World views that involve justice that exists only in works of Shakespeare lessen the depth of life's numerous wounds. But what's left for the rest of us, those of us who don't believe that life ever works out quite that cleanly? Well, there's the ability to laugh at the disturbing cruelty. Not long ago I heard a story about a portion of the Atacama desert in northern Chile; it is typically one of the driest areas on earth. The citizens of the area longed for rain, which is natural when it is so terribly dry year-round. Rain came. But what came was amounts of water the area hadn't experienced for years, which resulted in massive flooding, which resulted in mudslides, which resulted in millions of dollars in property damages and over one hundred people missing or dead. It would be a comfort to know the event was part of some plan. Or to call some mystic figure who may or may not be at fault cruel. Or to believe there is any sort of reason for such an event. But what if there is no reason? What if these people's lives and livelihoods were swept away by nothing more than an excess of wet mud? How could anyone without a stable worldview not break down just thinking of such a sick, twisted event? I've found that it's necessary to appreciate the sad, chaotic irony that is life. The people received the gift of water they craved, and life is still laughably terrible. Sarah Kane captured this essence. How can something as outwardly twisted and dark as "Cleansed" be so overwhelmingly bright, romantic, and even funny? It's because life's darkest features are so absurd that they can't be anything but comical.

Otherwise, what's left?

## **Religious State Apparatus**

by: Max Funk

### Characters:

**Karl**—26. Brash; like a professor giving a lecture. Well trimmed beard, wears casual (but nice) pants/sweater with tie. Leisurely.

**Jenny**—31. Calculated, guarded, speaks with passion. Hair in an elaborate bun, wears casual (but nice) dress that widens toward the bottom. Moves with purpose.

### Author's note:

Punctuation indicates how a line is being said.

A “/“ marks a point of interruption.

ACT I

*Paris, 1845*

*Curtains open.*

*Inside the study of Jenny and Karl's home. A window upstage left provides a glimpse of their street. It consists of long, white buildings that stretch for entire blocks. The architecture is incredibly simple and dull; there is no differentiation from habitation to habitation.*

*The floor of the study is a light colored hard wood. The walls of the study are lined with bookshelves; the books are haphazardly organized on them. Upstage center is a large brick fireplace with a medium burning fire. The mantle above it is bare, bar one small vase with a few measly looking flowers. Stage left of the opening in the fireplace, leaned against the fireplace, rests a stoker, a bellow, and an ash pan. There is one medium-sized circular table downstage right. On the table is a scattering of papers, articles, and books. Two red, padded chairs are drawn up to the table.*

***Karl** sits hunched over the table writing at a moderate pace.*

*A door-less entry way is centerstage left; no other rooms can be seen through the opening. Upstage right, in the corner, sits a small stack of non-symmetrically shaped logs.*

*The lights are warm, nostalgic, and inviting with a subtle orange or sepia tint.*

*\*Enter **Jenny**, wiping ink from the knuckle of her pinky finger with a kerchief.*

**Jenny:** What are you up to now?

**Karl:** I am working.

*\*Jenny walks up behind Karl, gently tussles his hair.*

**Karl:** An essay.

**Jenny:** Right...what is the essay about?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl slowly sets down his pen, takes off his glasses, turns to look at Jenny.*

**Karl:** Look...it would take a while...you would not/

**Jenny:** /I would not what?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl reclaims his glasses and the pen, continues writing.*

*\*Jenny crosses over to the other side of the table, leans in with both hands on the table.*

**Jenny:** Please?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl sets down the pen again.*

**Karl:** Fine. If you really must know...I suppose to put it into simpler words...what I am writing about is religion.

**Jenny:** But you still/

**Karl:** /More specifically, what I am thinking about right now, is that religion is an opiate for the masses.

*\*Jenny sits down opposite Karl, crosses her legs and holds her hands in her lap as if in prayer.*

**Jenny:** A bit strong...

**Karl:** Sorry?

**Jenny:** “Opiate” is a bit of a strong word, that is all.

**Karl:** That is the point...

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** Do I need to explain myself?

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** As I was saying, religion is an opiate/

*\*Jenny softly chuckles.*

*\*Karl smiles.*

**Karl:** ...an opiate, yes, meaning...that...much like the drug, religion stupefies those who are helplessly addicted to it.

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** Still with me?

**Jenny:** ...I suppose, somewhat. I/

**Karl:** /And this is why I did not want/

**Jenny:** /No, it is just...you said “opiate” as though it were an entirely negative word.

**Karl:** Well you see, religion/

**Jenny:** /No, that is not what I mean. I am talking about the metaphor.

*\*Karl holds back a grin, crosses his arms.*

**Karl:** Are you suggesting that opium, the highly addictive and oft lethal drug, is “*not all that bad?*”

*\*Jenny sighs, leans back in the chair.*

**Jenny:** Why do you suppose people use opium, Karl?

**Karl:** Because they are addicted to it and cannot help but take the drug.

**Jenny:** Before that, though.

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** Well I suppose I could see two main reasons.

*\*While speaking, Karl stands up and walks over to the fireplace.*

*He examines the fire which could be lower if effects allow.*

**Karl:** First...to mentally escape from unfavorable physical living conditions. Or even mental conditions I suppose. Second...would be for enjoyment. In these cases, people enjoy taking drugs...and opium would be another option for merriment.

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl saunters upstage right to the pile, picks up a log, and places it in the fireplace. The flames gradually rise back up. He leans against the mantle.*

**Jenny:** And do either of those reasons seem “*all that bad*” to you? And what about the medicinal purpose of the drug?

**Karl:** Well.../

**Jenny:** /Or, are you forgetting that you have regularly taken opium?

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** Simply put, the reasons people take opium are not *that* bad. I would even say opium, dangerous though it may be, helps some people, if not for medicinal purposes, then in a twisted way. It has to. Why else would people willingly take the drug?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl stares into the fireplace with his back to Jenny. He grabs the stoker and pokes at the logs in the fireplace.*

**Jenny:** Karl?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl continues looking into the fireplace.*

**Karl:** Yes...of course!

**Jenny:** What?

**Karl:** It is so obvious!

*\*Karl turns.*

**Karl:** There is of course another reason, one that led me to use the opiate metaphor in the first place.

*\*Jenny smiles, rubs her chin as if stroking a beard.*

**Jenny:** Mmm.

**Karl:** It is all about choice! What about those who do not choose to take opium?

**Jenny:** Maybe once they are addicted but.../

**Karl:** /Yes, of course. But, does anyone ever really *choose* to take opium?

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** ...yes. You for ex/

**Karl:** /Of course...of course...but if we were to ignore the medicinal uses.../

**Jenny:** /Still yes. And I am not sure that ignoring the medicinal uses is a fair/

**Karl:** /People are operating as cogs/

*\*While making this point, Karl's arms move downward with excited force. He drops the stoker, making it seem almost as if the stoker is thrown to the ground. Jenny winces, not out of fright, but*

*as though a vase she liked was dropped and broken. Karl grimaces and goes to his knees to inspect the damage.*

**Karl:** Cogs...in one big machine, Jenny.

*\*Karl takes the stoker back to its original position; he places it as gently as possible. He stands leaning against the fireplace.*

**Karl:** Whether it is family, or friends, or a terrible boss, or hating work, or having nothing else...the point is...opium is thrust upon people.

**Jenny:** I understand what you are saying...but...people choose. They seek out opium, buy it, and then do whatever it is they do with it. No one literally forces the drug down their throats.

**Karl:** Ohhh, if only that were the case. Obviously people are not being force fed...but the process is not far off!

**Jenny:** You really believe that?

**Karl:** I do. People's minds are being sedated without their full consent and there is not a way for them to go back, to say no. There is not a real choice before being addicted and there certainly is not a choice afterward.

*\*Karl rushes back to his seat. He snatches the pen and frantically writes. This goes on for some time while Jenny looks on with a contorted facial expression.*

**Jenny:** This is ridiculous.

*\*Karl looks up over his glasses while hunched over the paper, in a way that suggests he is being torn from something important.*

**Jenny:** You cannot seriously be implying that people do not choose their religions.

*\*Karl leans back, adjusts his glasses.*

**Karl:** Far from implying. I would say directly claiming.

**Jenny:** Then tell me, who are the people that choose for us?

**Karl:** Those in power of course.

*\*Jenny throws up her arms.*

**Jenny:** And who the hell might that be?

**Karl:** Follow the money; those who control the bulk of the money, ultimately, are the ones who have the choice.

*\*Shaking her head, Jenny stands up, pushes her chair in, and places both hands on the back leaning in toward Karl.*

**Jenny:** So some rich, business mogul decided what I/

**Karl:** /Do not be an absurdist, Jenny.

**Jenny:** Then who/

**Karl:** /I am not talking about some rich, secret, powerful individual. I am talking about the ruling class in general. The aristocracy. Those, collectively, who control the money in our state.

**Jenny:** So some rich business *collective* decided what I believe?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Jenny walks over to the bookshelf farthest from Karl. She begins organizing the books shelf by shelf. She periodically glances over at Karl.*

**Karl:** Again, you are missing the point. In a sense, although you are still being...only to mock me...you are right. No *one* person nor any elite group specifically sat down and decided what you, Jenny, would believe. Nor were there any such meetings for the general population. It is a bit more indirect than that.

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** It starts at a more local level...with parents. Parents tell their children what to believe, both explicitly and indirectly. Children are incredibly easy to mold...they do not know what opium is, nor do they realize once they are addicted.

**Jenny:** So parents are the ones who truly have the power then?

**Karl:** In the household, yes...but a...well...a chain of power leads back to the elites.

**Jenny:** Chain...of...power...hmmm...

**Karl:** Okay, so it is not my best metaphor. But if you follow the...

*\*The two make eye contact, smile as if holding back a laugh.*

**Karl:** ...so...parents tell you what to believe, but who told *them* what to believe?

**Jenny:** Their parents.

**Karl:** Right. And them?

**Jenny:** Their parents.

**Karl:** And so on. Great. But where do the parents get their ideas? If this line of reasoning/

**Jenny:** /Or chain of reasoning?

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** Right...where...oh yes. At some point there would have been a first set of parents, but that is not important and a bit redundant. There must be something else that informs them from outside the family structure that allows certain beliefs to flourish.

**Jenny:** Society?

**Karl:** Society is only a group of people. Generally undereducated and poor people at that. Where are these people told what to believe?

**Jenny:** What about the church? The institution, not necessarily one specific parish.

**Karl:** Yes, obviously the church plays a crucial role. They create and spread the religious discourse, of course, generally out of earnest rather than for more covert purposes.

**Jenny:** A role?

*\*Jenny walks back to the table and takes a seat. She starts organizing the mess of papers on the table.*

**Karl:** Do not get me wrong, the church is great at indoctrination, but they are very direct about the process. It is when people do not know they are being taught when they learn the most.

*\*Beat*

**Karl:** And generally the church acts on its own. Maybe in accordance with what benefits the aristocracy, but the church has enough power to conduct its own business.

**Jenny:** So you are talking about something that can be regulated by “those in power...”?

**Karl:** Correct.

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** The only medium I can really think of is formal education.

**Karl:** That is it exactly. Where else could those in power possibly reinforce the ideas and “facts” they want the masses to believe?

Schools are regulated. Certain ideas, religion being the relevant one

to this discussion, must be taught, and taught in a certain way at that.

**Jenny:** But...it is not like anyone is born with religion.

**Karl:** Meaning?

**Jenny:** Obviously religion is taught in schools. People need to learn it somewhere, do they not?

**Karl:** But do the masses “need” to learn whatever form of religion the aristocracy deems permissible for them to learn? Do they “need” to be told what to believe and how to believe it?

**Jenny:** But/

**Karl:** /No. No is the answer here.

**Jenny:** I just do not think that/

**Karl:** /The state influences the church and schools and workplaces and homes...they have the money that these institutions need and crave. Thus, all of the institutions have no choice but to submit to the regulations of the state; they are all working together to subtly promote the same state-sponsored, religious, cultural agenda.

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** And aristocrats do not dole out their money for nothing. There is a reason they invest in schooling and promote whatever discourse they deem “necessary.”

**Jenny:** And what might that underlying purpose be?

**Karl:** To pacify the general population! Religion is nothing more than a tool, one used by those in power on those who are not in power.

*\*The medium sound of a baby crying heard; Karl and Jenny look at each other and then toward the door. The baby almost immediately stops crying but they continue staring at the door for a few moments longer.*

**Jenny:** But...if...religion is an opiate...one imposed by the state on the unsuspecting masses to pacify those common people...how would you explain the fact that a majority of the aristocratic class practices the same religion supposedly used to stupefy those practicing it?

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** That is a fair question...

*\*Karl picks up and examines a newspaper from the table, stalling.*

**Karl:** ...but...you see...it is not that the upper class cannot be religious. No...rather, it is that they benefit from keeping the lower class religious. Yes, so, it does not really matter what the upper class *actually* believes.

**Jenny:** Why not?

**Karl:** The main side effect of the opiate named religion is that those using it remain both distracted and content.

**Jenny:** And?

**Karl:** It does not matter for the aristocratic class if they are distracted and content, because, quite frankly, they should be! They are born with money and power...what is there to worry about?

**Jenny:** So/

**Karl:** /Religion keeps the masses happy with a promise of rewards later, when in reality, they should be demanding rewards now.

*\*The baby's cry can be faintly heard; it crescendos to a medium level by the end of Karl's dialogue. Jenny rubs her temple with one hand, leaning on the side of the chair.*

**Karl:** Unlike the aristocracy, and even the bourgeoisie, the majority of society cannot afford the luxury that is distraction. People live miserable lives, barely affording their accommodations, barely scraping enough together to eat, toiling away for countless hours in conditions that are terrible for their health. And why? All to make money for those who already have more than they know what to do with! People do not understand that there is no reward coming to them!

*\*Beat.*

*\*The crying continues. Karl stares at the door.*

**Karl:** Or maybe there is, maybe I am wrong...But that would not mean people cannot, or should not, demand a reward now as well.

*\*Beat.*

*\*The baby's crying heightens. Karl looks at Jenny, the door, back at Jenny.*

**Karl:** Religion only perpetuates the unfair societal system that keeps the poor destitute and makes the privileged more privileged.

*\*Beat.*

*\*The baby's cry is unbearably loud. Both Karl and Jenny wince.*

**Jenny:** So when you say/

**Karl:** /Jenny...

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** So, when/

*\*Karl and Jenny now speak simultaneously, almost at a shout.*

**Karl:** /Well? Are you going to attend to that?

**Jenny:** /you say that religion is simply a tool for....

*\*Beat.*

*\*Jenny slowly, mechanically removes her hands from the table, pushes her chair out, stands, pushes her chair back in. She looks at Karl for a moment and then walks stiffly out of the room.*

*\*Curtain.*

ACT II

*\*Same setting as Act I.*

*\*Curtain drawn.*

*\*Karl sits in a chair drawn next to the fireplace smoking a pipe.*

*The chair faces the door. The fire has almost died out.*

*\*Enter Jenny holding a baby swaddled in a large pink cloth. She is gently rocking the baby from side to side. Karl and Jenny talk slightly softer than the level of the first act.*

**Jenny:** I was not quite finished.

**Karl:** With?

**Jenny:** Our conversation earlier.

**Karl:** Oh. Right. Okay.

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl pulls up the other chair to the opposite side of the fire place and sits back in his own chair. Jenny sits, still rocking the baby.*

**Jenny:** So...you claimed before that religion was a tool used by the aristocracy to keep those below distracted or pacified...right?

**Karl:** Yes, I would say/

**Jenny:** /Rhetorical. That was/

**Karl:** /Yes, of course.

*\*Beat.*

*\*During the following monologue, Karl stares intently at Jenny. He takes periodic tokes from his pipe.*

**Jenny:** As I was saying....yes...you said religion is a tool. But you completely ignored the definition of the metaphor you used to make your point! Again!

*\*Beat.*

*\*Jenny sounds weary.*

**Jenny:** What is a tool? A tool is some device, or more generally, some *thing*, that is used to carry out some specific *function*. Maybe it is the more powerful people in our society who use this particular tool most effectively. Maybe the powerful even created the tool; I do not know. But what I can say is that they sure as hell are not the only ones who are using that tool. A tool is something that can be used by *anyone*; further, it is not like every tool can do but one thing. What I am getting at is that the poor, the working class, the masses, the unprivileged...they use religion too. They are not forced into religion, nor do they then passively continue their practice of it. No, religion, as a tool, is, by definition, useful! And the masses *use* this tool, Karl. For good I might add. Sure, the promise of reward in the afterlife might make the desire to fight for rights, or better conditions in certain areas of society less necessary; not completely unnecessary, but less, definitely. But *how* can a doctrine that says one should be friendly to fellow humans, that one should not steal from others, that one should not murder, be all that bad? Huh? Look at the *good* religion has done, Karl! Sure, masses of people live in poverty, but, religion helps them deal with that. You may say that religion is not doing much more than distracting them, but what else can they do? Do you think that social and political revolutions can take place over night? No! Of course they cannot. It takes time, and that is if change is possible at all. So, while the people organize, or while they wait, unable to start some sort of

violent revolution, what is there to hold on to? What is the point of even trying? Where does the hope come from? *Religion. Religion* is a tool that people use to give them hope. And beyond the mindset that the tool can provide, people use the tool for real, concrete good. While people live in poverty, unable to change their situations, *who* is there to provide shelter? *Who* is there with food? With actual care for both the spiritual *and* physical side of humans? *Who* is there with advice and guidance? The answer is the church. The church is there! And you said it yourself, it is not like the church is *always* trying to push some agenda. No! The church actually believes people matter! Religion says that people deserve to be saved, Karl. Religion helps people. Sure, religion may be an opiate of sorts, but if it were entirely bad, people would leave; or, they would not practice religion in the first place. People take the opiate that is religion voluntarily.

*\*Beat.*

*\*Jenny gently rises and walks over to Karl. She slowly extends the pink bundle to Karl. He initially does not react. She waits. He reluctantly accepts the bundle and cradles it in one arm. Jenny proceeds to pace tiredly around the room during the following dialogue. She uses increasingly frequent and increasingly violent arm/hand gestures. Karl continues smoking the pipe with his free hand. He focuses on the baby and occasionally the fireplace, but does not look at Jenny.*

**Jenny:** Maybe people *want* to be distracted; have you considered that? Maybe they realize that stupefaction is the best way to live.

The point stands: people want opium. There are obvious benefits, otherwise, no one would take it!

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** Sure, religion is a tool. Okay. I get it. But a hammer can be used to build someone a house as much as it can be used as a weapon against that person.

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** It is not like a tool can carry out only one function, even if that one function was the original reason the tool was made. Tools are multipurpose and can be used by whomever for a plethora of reasons.

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** Religion can be, or rather, is, a tool used by “the masses” for reasons that are *incredibly* beneficial to them.

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** Do you *seriously* think that people’s miserable lives would actually be any better without religion?

*\*Beat.*

*\*The last of the logs in the fireplace can be heard softly breaking apart.*

**Karl:** Well....

*\*Beat.*

**Jenny:** Well, what?

**Karl:** That was...rather...well...impressive really. You hardly seemed to take a breath.

**Jenny:** Okay, but what do you think about what I said?

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** You certainly made some interesting points...

**Jenny:** Were you even paying attention?

**Karl:** No, of course I was. It is...you simply.../

**Jenny:** /Out with it!

**Karl:** I was a little...preoccupied.

**Jenny:** Meaning?

*\*Beat.*

*\*Karl subtly glances down.*

**Jenny:** Seriously?

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** No...you are getting the wrong idea...it is simply/

*\*Karl and Jenny now speak simultaneously; Jenny is hardly audible.*

**Jenny:** /As if you suddenly could not follow/

**Karl:** /I have had a lot on my mind and I/

*\*They stop speaking, simultaneously.*

*\*Beat.*

**Karl:** Jenny...do not be...

*\*Karl struggles to finish the sentence. He stares apologetically at Jenny, who turns to look out of the window. They remain for a few moments until Jenny mutters, almost to herself:*

**Jenny:** I need some air.

*\*Jenny exits the room at a moderate pace. Karl stares after her for a few moments. A door slams offstage. He then looks down at the*

*baby. He shifts his arm slightly to get a more comfortable position.*

*He looks back up at the door. He puts his pipe in his mouth.*

*\*Curtain.*