



Anthropoetics: the Journal of Generative Anthropology

UCLA's first Open Access journal. Published continuously since 1995.



Anthropoetics XXIX, no. 2 Spring 2024 (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/category/ap2902/>)

How John Lennon's "No Religion" Instantiates Religion: A Symbolic Analysis a la the Brothers Pageau

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Abstract

John Lennon's "Imagine" is an extraordinarily successful song that has become a secular anthem. Not surprisingly, its message often aggravates religious believers, who do not appreciate the invitation to imagine "no religion." In this reflection I engage the anti-religious thrust of "Imagine" from a different angle, following the symbolic worldview of Jonathan and Matthieu Pageau. The project of the Pageau brothers is to reclaim the symbolic grammar of the ancient world, which they hold to be as true for us now at the phenomenological level as it ever was. However, we do not apprehend this symbolic language and thus operate with blinkered vision, including when approaching religion and the biblical text, no matter how religious or irreligious we are.

"Imagine" is a striking demonstration of this. From the symbolic perspective of the Pageaus, the paradox is that it asks us to imagine no religion while at the same time it instantiates religion. Even this iconic anti-religious hymn is, to use Jonathan Pageau's phrase, "nested in religion." In almost every line, "Imagine" expresses itself as religion, puts forward religious propositions, and assume a religious structure. Ironically, the religious elements woven so skillfully (if unintendedly) into "Imagine" may explain why it continues to grip so many and never goes out of style. Yet, as a symbolic analysis makes clear, the message of the song undercuts itself. For instance, from the very first line—from a symbolic perspective—there could by definition be no "imagine" without "heaven." Lennon's religious *intuition* (what the song enacts) is extremely

astute, while his religious *imagination* (what the song is about) is deeply impoverished. Yet the same could be said of the religion Lennon putatively opposes, and both reflect the hollowed-out imagination of modernity. Indeed, as moderns, we all suffer this poverty of imagination to a greater or lesser degree.

Turning to generative anthropology (GA), we have what could be considered a very "modernist" project. Yet, its view of humanity as "the symbolic species" (to borrow Terrence Deacon's phrase) seems quite resonant with the symbolic perspective of the Pageaus. This is especially so because, for them, symbolism and the sacred are ultimately about *attention*. The resonance between the symbolic worldview and generative anthropology is considered in this reflection, as well as some possible incompatibilities, and get particular focus in the conclusion.

Keywords: John Lennon, Yoko Ono, "Imagine", generative anthropology, Eric Gans, symbolism, religious symbolism, Jonathan Pageau, Matthieu Pageau

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John Lennon's "Imagine" is an extraordinarily successful song that has become in Bishop Robert Barron's words "a secular anthem."^[1] From its gentle, rocking cadences to its rousing idealistic chorus, this disarmingly simple song seems to be instantly familiar to nearly everyone. It must be one of the most iconic pop songs ever recorded. "Imagine" is sung at international events like the Olympics as a message of peace, hope and global unity. Liverpool, hometown to the Beatles, has even used the lyrics of "Imagine" as the motto for its airport: "Above us only sky."

"Imagine" has not lacked worldly critics, including in the music world. Steely Dan's song "Only a Fool Would Say That" lambasts "Imagine" as effete and vapid, an insult to regular people who struggle through life as best they can.^[2] More predictably, the message of "Imagine" often aggravates religious believers who don't appreciate the invitation to imagine "no religion." Bishop Barron, who otherwise considers himself a great fan of Lennon's work, is representative.^[3] In his video critique of "Imagine," his concern is not just that the dismissal of religion is simplistic, or that the song is used in a hypocritical way—as when wealthy Hollywood actors sang "imagine no possessions" from multimillion dollar homes to help us through the COVID pandemic.^[4] His deeper concern is that, by banishing heaven and hell, the song rejects any absolute moral criteria and opens the door to amoral nihilism. Its utopian vision also ignores the nightmares of totalitarian collectivism, roads to "hell" paved with comparable idealistic aspirations.

In this reflection I intend to engage the anti-religious thrust of "Imagine" from a different angle, following the symbolic world view of Jonathan and Matthieu Pageau. "Imagine" is a striking demonstration of how symbolic meaning structures reality and how even this iconic "anti-religious" hymn is, to use Jonathan Pageau's phrase, "nested in religion." From the symbolic perspective, the paradox of "Imagine" is that it asks us to imagine no religion while at the same time it instantiates religion. From beginning to end and in almost every line, "Imagine" expresses itself as religion, puts forward

religious propositions, and takes on a religious structure. Ironically, the religious elements, woven so skillfully (if unintendedly) into "Imagine" might help explain why it continues to grip so many people and never seems to go out of style.

Yet, as a symbolic analysis makes clear, the message of the song undercuts itself. For instance, from the very first line, there could by definition be no "imagine" without "heaven," at least from a symbolic perspective. Lennon's religious *intuition* (what the song enacts) is extremely astute, while his religious *imagination* (what the song is about) is deeply impoverished. Yet the same could be said of the religion Lennon putatively opposes, and both reflect the hollowed-out imagination of modernity. Moreover, as moderns, we all suffer this poverty of imagination to some extent. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not to "defend" religion or to single Lennon out as a particularly egregious detractor. Instead, "Imagine" is viewed here as expressive of the predicament of all or most of us in modernity, a predicament which is, ironically, a lack of imagination. The symbolic perspective illuminates this predicament in a particularly useful way.

To the extent that generative anthropology is a "modernist" project, or more specifically, to the extent that it might deny that modernism entails some inherent poverty of imagination, it may be at odds with the Pageaus' way of thinking. On the other hand, since generative anthropology sees humanity as "the symbolic species" (to borrow Terrence Deacon's phrase), it seems more than a little resonant with their perspective.[5] This is especially so because, for Jonathan and Matthieu Pageau, symbolism and the sacred are ultimately about *attention*, which is also the genesis of symbolic meaning in generative anthropology.

In the sections to follow I first overview the symbolic worldview of the Pageau brothers, then apply it to the interpretation of "Imagine." Along the way, I note some commonalities between the symbolic worldview and generative anthropology, which get more attention in the conclusion.

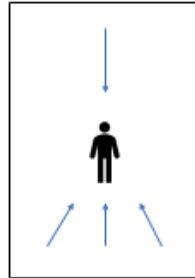
Jonathan and Matthieu Pageau and the Symbolic Hierarchy

The Pageaus worked out their system of symbolic thinking collaboratively over many years. Jonathan Pageau is an Eastern Orthodox liturgical artist, editor, writer, speaker and religious thinker. He has a large internet presence, and leads a number of artistic and literary projects. He presents his ideas mostly through videos and lectures, as well as interviews with an increasingly wide range of thinkers.[6] Matthieu Pageau, the less public of the two, is the older brother, and initially took the lead in developing the symbolic perspective. He expounds it primarily through his rather recent book, *The Language of Creation*. [7] He has chosen a hermetic way of life, but has no religious affiliation.

The worldview of the Pageau brothers involves the symbolic "grammar" of Judeo-Christian scripture and the Eastern Fathers, and of Christianity in general, including not only sacred text and commentary but rituals and practices, sacred imagery, architecture, and the like. However, this symbolic language is shared by ancient religions and the ancient world in general. As the Pageaus point out, it can also be seen in the yin and yang symbol, or in the layout and aesthetic of

churches, shrines, temples and other sacred spaces. This is not to infer that all religions are the same, but rather, that its symbolic expression reflects a perspective that ancient people would intuitively recognize, and, more importantly for present purposes, that in crucial ways remains phenomenologically true.

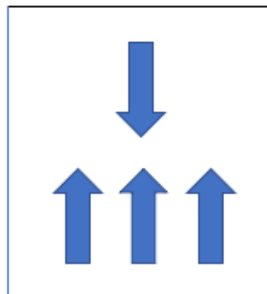
The human as mediator of "heaven" and "earth"



This symbolic worldview is not, for them, an older "naïve" version of the scientific worldview that has been superseded by it. It is still operational, even if as moderns we operate with the perspective more or less in ignorance. A symbolic hierarchy really *does*, necessarily, express the structure of reality; it is the way reality lays itself out. From this perspective, human beings are "mediators of heaven and earth," the essence of being human.

This hierarchy is often explicated by both Jonathan and Matthieu Pageau using a triangular or pyramidal representation. The structure expresses unity or identity at the top, and multiplicity spreading out below. This pattern is applied to the Genesis creation narrative, the Lord's Prayer, the Garden of Eden, the Sermon on the Mount, or in sacred text (not only biblical) with mountains as the locus of the sacred. For Jonathan Pageau, this hierarchical structure is all encompassing and encapsulates as well the essence of narrative in myth, fable, fairy tale, cinematic plots, computer games, as well as everyday perception and experience. The triangular representation is not the only way the symbolic hierarchy can be grasped visually, but it is useful for present purposes and will be revisited many times.

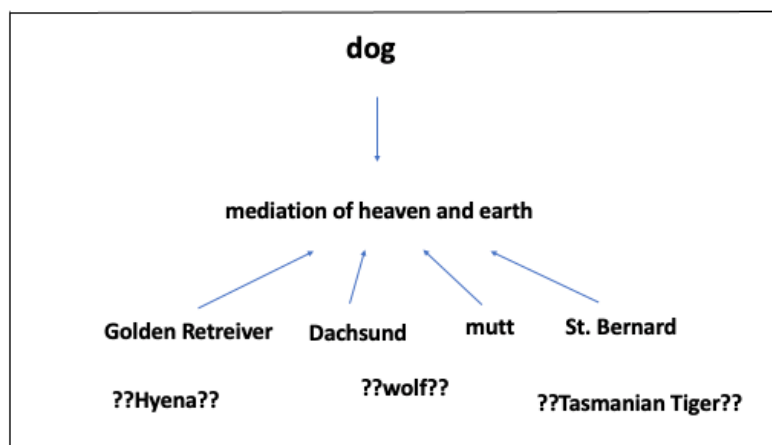
Spirit informs matter



Matter expresses spirit

The yin and yang symbol, with its familiar contrast of light and dark, is also a particularly useful example here because it condenses much of the substance of the Pageaus' symbolic worldview in a single image, and also demonstrates something of what was once universal in this perspective, apart from consideration of Judeo-Christian scripture.[8] (It will also have no small bearing on John Lennon's text.) Taking the perspective of the Pageaus, the light segment of the yin and yang symbol represents "heaven," signifying spirit, meaning, unity, idea, actuality, identity. The dark side of the yin and yang represents "earth," meaning undifferentiated matter, chaos, potentiality, multiplicity. There is an interdependence between "heaven" (spirit) and "earth" (matter) which Matthieu Pageau expresses as follows: "Spirit informs (confers identity on) matter" while "Matter expresses (embodies, supports) spirit." Again, this can be usefully represented in a pyramidal structure suggested in the images above.

The insistent claim of the Pageaus is that this is, necessarily, the structure of reality. Moreover, it is true at all levels, fractally, all the way up and all the way down. Among the many "non-spiritual" example that Jonathan Pageau uses to demonstrate this is the identity of "dog." [9] "Dog" exists at an immaterial level, a "spiritual" level, as a unity, an identity, the structure of attention. It is as if a finger from "heaven" came down to confer identity: "dog." The multiplicity of "dog" is expressed or embodied, for instance, in different breeds. Very importantly, in the Pageau's system there is also a *margin* of identity which poses riddles to the the identity. Why not include a wolf, which is essentially a dog, but is not considered a dog. How about a hyena? How about a dog-like animal like the Tasmanian Tiger?



The margin of identity, which is always present, is crucial in the Pageaus' system. Cathedrals have gargoyles. Illuminated manuscripts have bizarre doodles on the edges. City walls have tangles of climbing vines. Christ is crucified outside the city. Biblical stories may have marginal or "foreign" women, not fully integrated into the community, who becomes pivotal figures. The Garden of Eden is guarded by an angel with a flaming sword, Thebes by the Sphinx, Buddhist temples by *devas*. The margin presents Sphinx-like riddles, the possibility or impossibility of being incorporated into the symbolic hierarchy, and even the possibility of revitalizing it, or of challenging it, or of transforming it.

It will be useful to introduce some biblical verses exemplifying the Pageaus' idea of the symbolic hierarchy.

With wisdom, the Lord founded the earth; with understanding he established the heavens; with his knowledge the depths were split, and the skies dropped their dew. (Proverbs 3:19)[10]

This is not a scientific description but a description of meaning, following, again, the pattern of attention. Words like wisdom, understanding and knowledge seem redundant, as if they were used for poetic effect, but in fact they are quite different, and reflect both the shape and directionality of the symbolic hierarchy. Wisdom comes *down* to confer identity. Understanding rises *up* to express it. Knowledge mediates wisdom with understanding, heaven with earth. Another very similar verse is both figuratively and concretely true:

With wisdom, a house is built; with understanding, it is established; with knowledge, its rooms are filled. . . .
(Proverbs 24:3)[11]

"Wisdom" (for instance, inspiration, design, architectural drafts) works downward to build the house, while "understanding" (knowing how to read plans, use tools, put things together) works upward to "establish" it, to give it, literally, a foundation. Through wisdom acting with understanding, disparate objects (nails, lumber, fiberboard, glass, plaster) become a unified whole that physically embodies "house." The person, the builder, mediates heaven and earth, by uniting wisdom—the immaterial wisdom from "heaven," conferring identity from above—to the potentiality below. "Knowledge" mediates the wisdom and the understanding.

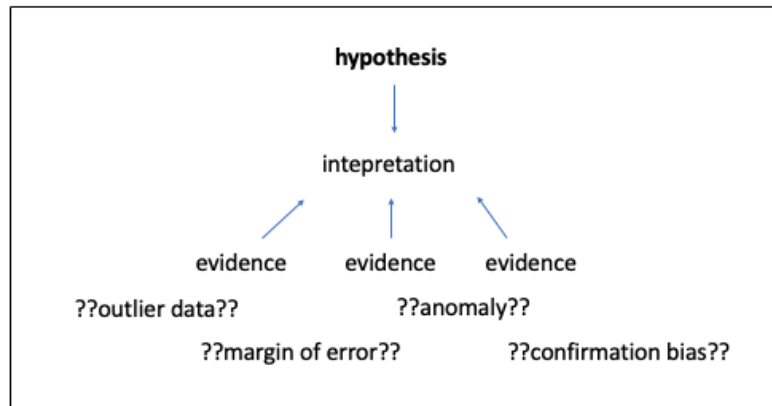
Not coincidentally, ancient cosmologies were "house like," with the heavenly canopy as roof, supporting pillars, and the earth as foundation. This seems to validate Eric Gans' view that "theology is good anthropology, but bad cosmology." [12] The Pageaus would see it much differently, that is to say, phenomenologically. Just as, in the symbolic view, we could say that sex is a symbol of love (unity in multiplicity) rather than the heart mark being a symbol of sex, in the ancient cosmologies, it was not so much that symbolism was based on the sky but that the sky was based on symbolism. It was not so much that ancient cosmology hypothesized celestial mechanics, though it did do that, but more essentially that the earth and cosmos themselves were symbols, and symbols specifically of the structure of perception and experience, of attention. People didn't passively observe but *participated* in the cosmos, and symbolism permeated the world. Finding out new things about the sky appears superficially to undermine symbolic meaning, yet in fact the symbolic meaning goes on being true. *That* symbolic hierarchy was never invalidated and, in the view of the Pageaus, no-one can sensibly live without it, including cosmologists and anthropologists.

Thus, in the Pageaus' view, cosmology and anthropology are necessarily *nested in religion*, in a symbolic hierarchy of meaning that includes "heaven" (which confers meaning) and "earth" (which expresses/embodies meaning). [13] To demonstrate this, we can think of something quite scientific and rigorously procedural, such as designing and conducting an experiment, and transpose it to the verse from Proverbs:

With wisdom, a house is built; with understanding, it is established; with knowledge, its rooms are filled. . . .

(Proverbs 24:3)[14]

With a hypothesis, an experiment is designed; with empirical evidence, it is corroborated; with interpretation, the theory is vindicated.



A working scientist operates within such a symbolic hierarchy. Moreover, the "margin" of identity outlined by the Pageaus is both unavoidable and crucially important. It is those elements that challenge the identity of the hypothetical (but inescapably symbolic) structure: confirmation bias, margin of error, anomalous data, outlier data, and the like. These question marks at edges of the identity of the empirical structure are intrinsic to it. Moreover, marginal elements such as a single anomaly, can sometimes overturn scientific paradigms, as in the "paradigm shift" described by Thomas Kuhn.[15] To make a scriptural analogy, the paradigm shift follows the same symbolic pattern as that of the "foreign woman" in the biblical narrative who ends up establishing the matrilinear succession.

Again, as Jonathan Pageau often insists, science is "nested in religion," meaning that, despite whatever it claims about itself, it subsists at a lower level within the symbolic hierarchy wherein any human sense can be made about anything. This is compatible with, and to some extent restates, what Eric Gans also asserts about the inescapable primacy of the sign; without symbolic representation, no structure of human knowledge is conceivable; nothing can be known.[16] Yet, as it is with science, so it is also with all of us, at all levels, including all of our activities in daily life; we cannot help but live and act within this world of symbolic meaning and its familiar rituals. This applies to the sharing of meals, another example of familiar ritual that both Jonathan Pageau and Eric Gans use to underscore this point. Yet, for the Pageaus, it applies as well to the minutest levels of experience, and to every breath we take. The symbolic world arrays itself fractally at every level of human perception and experience, all the way up, and all the way down.

The change wrought by the Copernican revolution and its aftermath, however welcome the leap in knowledge, is from a *meaningful* cosmos to a cause-and-effect cosmos, a mechanistic one. The reference point is no longer the human being, the center of perception, since the human is now a detached observer of the physical universe, stretching from the

indescribably large to the infinitesimally small. Properly speaking, there is no meaning here, other than what is arbitrarily or whimsically assigned. However, there is an implied scale of value: the smallest unit of description tends have the greatest ontological weight. What is *really* important about the sun is its physics and composition, not the fact that, incidentally, it gives us light, warmth, and life, or appears in diurnal cycles. What is *really* important thing about our hand it its vasculature or its cellular description under the microscope, not the fact that it, incidentally, feels, grasps or builds, the *telos* of the hand.

We have imbibed this perspective so thoroughly that when a reductionist insists (one of Jonathan Pageau's favorite examples) that "You're nothing but a bag of chemicals", it has the force of an incontrovertible argument.[17] Yet, as Pageau points out, this is a rhetorical trick; one can pretend to demystify anything by dropping down to some arbitrary descriptive level. Why make the case with "bag of chemicals"? A bag of chemicals is not meaningless; it also has an identity. That is, the "bag of chemicals" also necessarily exists within a symbolic hierarchy, in order to be identified, or imagined, as a "bag" of "chemicals."

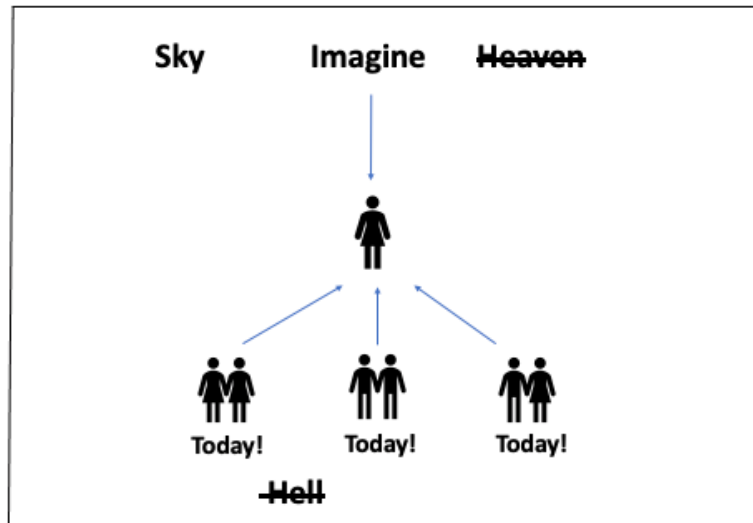
Thus, the point here is not to bemoan the reductionist view because it banishes from the limelight poetry, beauty, mystery, delight, human worth, and the like. The point is more basic. Neither we nor our systems of knowing are detachable from the cosmos in which they exist, and they must necessarily exist within a symbolic hierarchy of meaning. To be human is to mediate meaning or identity (the heaven part) to undifferentiated physical reality (the earth part). What is more, as we have seen, modern science itself cannot help but conduct itself and articulate itself within this symbolic framework, whether or not it is aware of it. Science chooses what to look at and determine what it means, establishes hierarchies of relevance, follows rituals, and articulates itself in language which is not only symbolic by definition, but representative of the very symbolic structures and hierarchies that science is imagined to have superseded.

Yet, importantly, it is not just the "materialist" but also the "religionist" who has lost the awareness of reality laying itself out as a symbolic hierarchy. The meaning of "heaven" for the religionist has been reduced purely to the idea of the place in the sky where we (hopefully) go when we die. As both Jonathan Pageau and the biblical scholar N.T. Wright frequently point out, this is a truncated understanding at best, and in its most naïve form is not really in accord with the biblical text or the basic doctrinal creeds of Christianity.[18] Both the "materialist" and the "religionist" have lost awareness of "heaven" as the source of meaning and identity, how it relates to "earth," and how we as human beings, mediate between them and exist in this interpenetrated world.

Thus, the "religionist" adopts modernist presuppositions, but from a reverse perspective, believing, like the "materialist," that if something is "symbolic" it does not really exist, while at the same time taking the most naïve interpretations of religious symbolism as "literally true." Such is the religion John Lennon sets himself against in "Imagine," while aligning himself with the demystifying materialist framework. Yet all of us as moderns share—with the "materialist", with the "religionist," and with the "Lennonist"—this misapprehension of what reality is and how it manifests itself, including a misapprehension about our apprehension, which is necessarily symbolic. There is, literally, no "literal" meaning.[19]

A Symbolic Interpretation of "Imagine"

Verse 1



The first line of "Imagine"—"Imagine there's no heaven"—is directly relevant to what has just been overviewed, and encapsulates everything that follows in the song. Likewise, the analysis here will constantly return to the same point: the inherent contradiction in that first line, recapitulated in many other lines. At the same time, Lennon is quite skillful in weaving a deeply symbolic structure into the song, crudely approximated in the diagram above to highlight the pattern that Lennon establishes. The song reproduces the cosmic structure referred to by the Pageaus. It is the symbolic structure of the Genesis creation narration, the Lord's Prayer, the Garden of Eden, the Sermon on the Mount, sacred mountains, or even scientific hierarchies. Now it appears in the opening verse of "Imagine." "Imagine" is at the top of the pyramid with "sky" and then "all the people" are below it, living in the present moment to embody that ideal. It should be noted that (at least in this configuration), "imagine" is "above" in a song which claims there is no meaningful "above" or "below."

The mediating figure in the diagram is female to acknowledge the essential contribution of Yoko Ono, who co-wrote the song and without whose influence and philosophy of performative affirmation the song could never have been conceived. **[20]** In the diagram, the song, or the voice of the singer, mediate "heaven and earth." "All the people" fractally enact this mediation through imitation. They also act, collectively, as intermediaries between the "spiritual" world, the higher principle proposed by John and Yoko, and the world of corporeal reality. They "express" the higher principle proposed to them by "living for today," the present moment. In other words, a "spiritual" principle is proposed by which people can live their lives in a way that not only befits that higher principle but expresses it, embodies it, brings it into being in the world. The unity of "imagine" unites "multiplicity" under a collective ideal. Yet, that is almost by definition what a religion is and does.

To return to the first line, "Imagine there's no heaven," presents a contradiction from the standpoint of the symbolic understanding. Recalling the yin and yang symbol, it is like saying, "Imagine there's no yin; imagine only yang." "Heaven," whatever else it means, involves that immaterial reality that confers meaning on physical reality. This is the symbolic language of the bible, the perspective of the ancient world in general, but also the basic structure of reality from a human perspective. There is no "imagine" (conceiving ideas, conferring meaning) without "heaven" (the non-physical realm of meaning itself). It is only from "heaven" that any meaning can be obtained to bestow identity on the corporeal world. John and Yoko appeal to "heaven" ("imagine") to emphasize its non-existence. It is like saying "Imagine there's no imagine" or "think non-thought" or "verbalize non-speech." Again, this contradiction carries over into the rest of the song. John and Yoko exhort us think from above to transform what is below, while insisting there is no above or below.

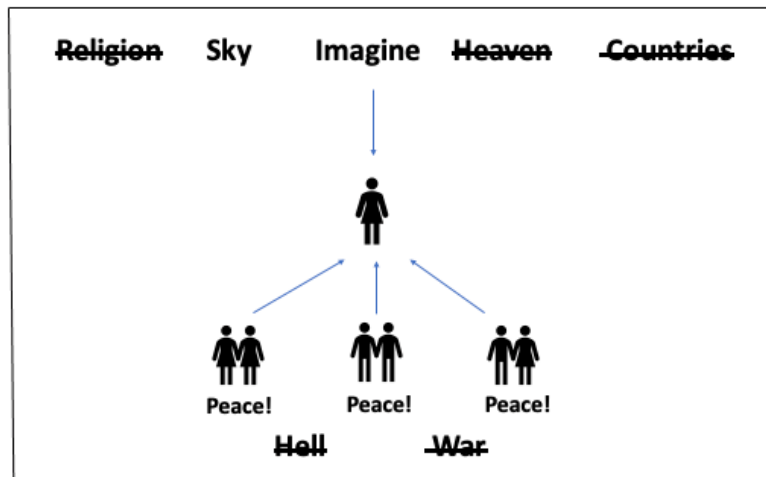
Yet, to be fair, John and Yoko aren't thinking of *that* heaven: the symbolic realm that is the source of all meaning and identity. What they mean is the place up in the sky where you go after you die, if you don't go to the other place, hell, which is "below us." In other words, it is the "heaven" and "hell" displaced by the Copernican revolution, which showed us that "above us" there is "only sky," our materialistic universe. In the logic of Lennon and Ono, acknowledging the primacy of this naturalistic universe allows us to live for today, to be present for the moment, and not to be hung up about the carrot or stick of some eternal reward or eternal punishment waiting for us in the beyond, in places that don't exist. This will be a stirring proposition to many (at least if it is not subjected to much scrutiny), and it is easy to see why people have been attracted to the song and its message.

However, as Jonathan Pageau has argued repeatedly, the "heaven" and "hell" denied in the song are neither, really, the heaven and hell of the bible, nor of the ancient world in general.[21] They are a comparatively modern expression of religion, especially as it came to be envisioned in reaction to the implications of the materialistic universe, rather than some ancient superstition that was overcome by it. Both the critical impetus of "Imagine" and the target of the critique (a kind of naïve literalism reacting to modernism) are quintessentially modern. To be clear, we are all modern in this way, to one degree or another, no matter how religious or irreligious we are. Yet, to the extent that we are religious and offended by the song, it might behoove us to understand that the religion that John and Yoko critique invites this type of critique, because it has become a parody of itself. As N.T. Wright has argued, Christians have evolved a kind of canonical folk religion about the afterlife that is influenced, perhaps, more by lurid religious paintings than by actual doctrines or the biblical text.[22] Christians in this sense ought to relearn the meaning of heaven and hell.

At any rate, returning to the symbolic world and its implications for the song, the structure of "Imagine" remain deeply religious. Intentionally or unintentionally, the first verse recapitulates the opening passages of Genesis. Sky is declared "only sky," or in other words: *Let there be "only sky."* "Imagine" in the song ironically acts as the fiat creation of non-creation. But, to borrow Matthieu Pageau's important symbolic (and biblical) trope, "Imagine" is the "seed" of an idea, existing in "heaven" (by virtue of being an idea). This idea will be proposed downward, "informing" (giving meaning or identity to) the world of physical reality below it, which will in turn incorporate the idea and embody it.

The next verse of "Imagine" repeats this structure: the seed grows. It extends the invitation in the song, and further concretizes its vision on earth. Just as there is really "no heaven" and "no hell" there should be "no countries," that is, no divisions or partitions separating the family of humanity. Just as "Above us only sky" in the first verse eliminated heavenly and infernal realms, "No religion too" renders religious systems obsolete. And just as imagining no heaven and hell was "easy if you try" in the first verse, this elaboration of the vision in this verse "isn't hard to do."

Verse 2



The symbolic progression of "Imagine" has moved from the general to the more specific, characteristic also of the Genesis creation narrative and in line with Matthieu Pageau's symbolic analysis in *The Language of Creation*. It has moved from vertical hierarchies to horizontal spatial realities, from spiritual concepts ("heaven," "hell") and the empty material universe ("sky") to the way people organize the world (borders) and structure their thought (religious systems). But borders and religions engender war because they create causes which people "fight or die for." Nonviolence ("Living life in peace") flows naturally from the lifestyle of living for the present moment ("Living for today"). The end of war results naturally from national and religious identity becoming irrelevant and superfluous.

John and Yoko's philosophy of bringing about peace through affirmative projection is not unique to this song. Yoko's philosophy attracted John from the moment they first met, as recounted in their famous *Playboy* interview, and it reappears as well as in their other perennial hit, "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," where a children's chorus intones in the outro,

War is over
 If you want it
 War is over
 Now...[23]

It is not my point to quarrel, like Bishop Baron does, with the facile conclusions implied by the second verse of "Imagine." And, to be fair, such wildly unlikely projections are by no means alien to the biblical eschaton, where wolves lie down with lambs.[24] In fact, further below it will be noted (as many others cannot have failed to notice) that this is not coincidental. John and Yoko's utopian vision, intentionally or unintentionally, borrows heavily from the New Testament. Such an unconscious Christian influence, or perhaps semi-conscious Christian influence, is in line with Tom Holland's recent book *Dominion* which makes the same point about modernity in general.[25] It is central as well to René Girard's thesis about modernity.[26] Modernity, in this view, is the playing out of the biblical revelation. Tom Holland explicitly argues that John Lennon (by extension, Yoko) is solidly in the stream of the "Christian revolution." [27]

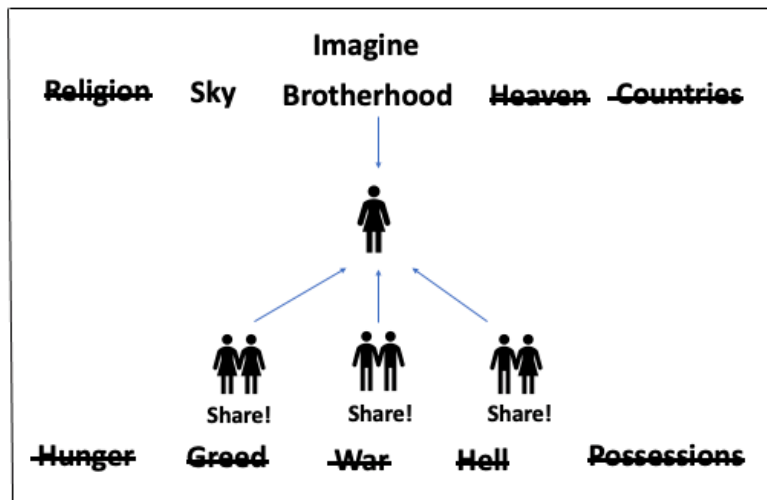
But my concern here is with the symbolic analysis. In the second verse, "all the people" act once again as intermediaries between the higher principles proposed from above (by John and Yoko) and its expression from below. "All the people" express, embody, concretize these principles by "Living life in peace." Again, this is not just "no religion" but, at least structurally, the very essence of any religious system: accepting "higher principles" as a group and trying to live them out.

This becomes even more apparent moving on to the chorus of the song, where "evangelization" comes into play. Cleverly, John and Yoko are engaging the listener in a new way that draws them into dialogue, with "You may say I'm a dreamer": *What is your reaction to this proposition? Do you think I'm just a dreamer?* To be a "dreamer" means to be improbably idealistic, but, reverting to the Pageaus' terms, it also means being able to host a higher spiritual principle, which John and Yoko clearly think their song represents. Yet it must be noted that this is something of a "bait and switch," because earlier we were asked to *disbelieve* heaven and hell because they were unrealistic and lack concrete reality. Now we are urged to *believe* a very ambitious idealism, *despite* the fact, or even *because* of the fact, that it lacks concrete reality.

Perhaps for this reason, the apparent implausibility of the vision, Lennon turns to more concrete proof with "I'm not the only one." Other people are able to entertain this higher principle, so it cannot be so very unreasonable. In fact, you can, too: "I hope someday you'll join us." As just noted, the listener is gently "evangelized," invited into this positive vision, and offered community.

As described earlier, a crucial aspect to the symbolic structure of the Pageaus is the "margin" of identity. We can think of the "margin" of identity in "Imagine" in different ways. We can define the margin as those elements, those question marks at the edge of identity, that present themselves for potential incorporation into it, or not, as the case may be. In that sense, the margin in John and Yoko's song could be all of the bad things which are progressively banished in imaging a better world: heaven, hell, borders, creeds, and in the upcoming verse war, property, greed, hunger. The margin could also be all of the nice things that *are* incorporated into that vision: living for the moment, peace, and in the upcoming verse, sharing and brotherhood. But there is also a sense—testament again to Lennon's skill as a songwriter—that *we* constitute the margin: we, the undecided listeners, who are being invited to participate. If we do, the world will be transformed because it will be unified, with all people sharing this vision. (If not . . . John and Yoko's "borderless" world seems to imply some very sharp edges.)

Verse 3



At any rate, once again, a principle "informs," is proposed from above, and is answered or "expressed" from below, in a world unified around that vision. Yet, in fact, this is really another "bait and switch." A few lines earlier we were encouraged to "live for today" and not for an eternal future with rewards or punishments. Yet here we are now, being encouraged to hope for a future ("will be") where everyone adheres to the correct higher principles, but it is not religious! What is more, though we were encouraged to disbelieve heaven and hell, now, a future "heaven" is reintroduced with its vision of the future world being "as one," with everyone sharing the same higher principles and living it out on earth in peace and unity. The alternative is to be condemned to the "hell" of futile killing and dying when these higher principles are rejected: violence and disunity. (This "hell" is not entirely different for that of the Pageaus: meaningless chaos and hopelessly squandered potentiality.)[28]

The exasperation that many religious believers have with "Imagine" can be better understood in this context. It has less to do, I think, with Bishop Barron's objection that the song rejects moral absolutes than with the fact that the song makes a gesture of superseding religion, then brings it back in through the back door, acting as if the new alternative to religion were not religion. In this, it is somewhat reminiscent of *The First Church of Christ Without Christ* in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*. [29] Undoubtedly, John and Yoko had no intention to be disingenuous, but practically speaking, it is as if they did. The third verse seems particularly jarring in this way, because it plays on obvious New Testament tropes like the sermon on the Mount, the feeding of the five thousand ("no need for greed or hunger"), [30] or the sharing of possessions by the early Christian community in the book of Acts ("no possessions"). [31]

The second line, "I wonder if you can," is a skillful rhetorical touch, having moved from "it's easy" and "it isn't hard" to a gentle taunt or challenge, with a hint of moral urgency. Once again, the higher principle of "imagine" that was proposed from the first line and extended through all verses is further specified and concretized: no heaven, no hell à no countries, no causes, no war, no religion à no possessions, no greed, no hunger.

The higher principles "inform" the concrete human reality in greater and greater detail. With considerable craft, Lennon makes the "cosmic" principle broader but at the same time more specific. And humanity once again expresses or embodies a "heavenly" reality concretely from below through universal brotherhood and the sharing of food and possessions. The repetition of the evangelical chorus then closes the song.

Rather than obviating the need for religion, "Imagine" systematically emphasizes the need for it. It is not just that "Imagine" cannot conceptually avoid the need for religion insofar as it has to express itself through symbolic meaning—though it is very important to grasp this, and it has been the thrust of this analysis. More than this, the song underscores the need for humanity to structure the world according to what can only be called "higher principles."

But what "higher" "principle"? Just as "Imagine" snatched religion away with one hand, then stealthily reintroduced it with another, in the end the "stealth religion" is also snatched away because it actually has nothing holding it together. What is the higher principle which would unite the world, the higher principle which would gather "all the people" together and under which "the world will be as one"? There is no "higher principle" because above us there is "only sky." Why would living for the present moment discourage us from greed or violence, or encourage peaceful co-existence and selfless generosity? Apparently, it is the power of "Imagine," of performative affirmation, of bringing good things into being by calling them up. Yet, in a world of "only sky," in this seemingly liberating naturalistic cosmos, surely "imagine" is nothing but a ghostly epiphenomenon produced by some synaptic processes in the brain. And surely "all the people" are but nothing but "bags of chemicals." John and Yoko cannot exempt themselves from the implication of their naturalistic cosmos, any more than the pitiful Christians who believe in heaven and hell.

It is at this point that other critiques of the song of "Imagine," such as those of Bishop Barron or Steely Dan, could be brought into the discussion. However, my purpose has not been to engage the John and Yoko's message at that level, that is, the social, moral, ideological or even the theological level. Instead, my purpose has been to look at the symbolic structure of the song in a descriptive way and show that, in imaging "no religion," John and Yoko instantiate religion in almost every possible way, in spite of themselves. If there is some "takeaway" in the analysis from a religious perspective, it is that John and Yoko, "made in the image of God," cannot help but act as intermediaries between "heaven" and "earth," reflecting in many ways the essence both of the human and of the sacred.

The Symbolic World, Generative Anthropology, and the Sacred

In overviewing symbolic thinking before the analysis of "Imagine," I touched upon its relevance to generative anthropology. As I conclude here, I return to that comparison, though in a necessarily brief way, to further consider points of resonance between the two, as well as elements that may be incompatible.

There is obviously a strong affinity between the Pageaus' way of thinking and GA insofar as both see the "sacred" as fundamental to the human, to ideation, to cognition. As noted, GA has adopted Terrance Deacon's phrase "the symbolic species" as a fundamental description that puts symbolic meaning at the core of what it means to be human.[32] Unlike

the Pageaus, GA adopts this in an evolutionary sense, as an account of hominization. It is hypothesized in an idealized originary *event*, a scene of representation, where *the sign*—symbolic meaning, language—is born. However, even though the symbolic perspective is not focused on evolutionary origins, there is consonance with GA here, too, because the Pageau's symbolic hierarchy, like GA's originary scene, is about "attention." "Attention" has also linked the Pageaus with associated thinkers such as the cognitive scientists John Vervaeke (with his "relevance realization")^[33] and Iain McGilchrist (with his "attending").^[34]

Another similarity with GA is the phenomenological perspective of the Pageaus, insofar as it infuses both the sacred and the "profane" elements of experience with a world of symbolic significance. As noted, this connects well with GA's sense of the sacred permeating language and experience at an everyday level. As also noted, like Eric Gans, Jonathan Pageau continually emphasizes the ritual that structures our existence, for instance in the sharing of meals. Another noteworthy element is that the symbolic perspective is premised, like GA, on the universality of symbolic meaning. Even though the Christian perspective, and for Jonathan Pageau specifically the Eastern Orthodox perspective, is a key focus, what they explore is a symbolic grammar common to all cultures and religious traditions.

As to the specifically Christian focus of Pageaus' symbolic perspective, there is something of relevance for GA here, too. Jonathan and Matthieu Pageau draw particularly on the spiritual tradition of the Eastern Church and Eastern Fathers, notably St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Maximus the Confessor, whose theology is articulated along the symbolic lines outlined by the Pageaus.^[35] Somewhat paradoxically, GA stands within the tradition growing out of Western Christianity, which has bequeathed a very "propositional" framework, an inheritance from the scholastic tradition. Yet GA posits that the declarative is not primary, and evolved out of an earlier "ostensive" form—where the word expresses rather than discusses its referent (for instance crying out in alarm, "Fire!")^[36] Thus, it seems that GA's way of thinking has a friendlier echo in the symbolic, mystical framework of Eastern Christianity where the ostensive is, in a sense, already intuitively understood, and not in a small way: e.g., it is expressed and experienced as such liturgically.^[37] To consider the schema of the Pageaus, the triangular diagrams I have tried to approximate above have a structure that is essentially ostensive; attention and identity are ostensive.

The sense of the "margin" of identity, so crucial to the Pageaus' symbolic perspective, seems highly suggestive in relation to the "center" and "periphery" of GA's scene of representation. At the same time, it is far from clear whether they refer to the same thing. GA's originary scene comprises a center of attention and a communal periphery of participation, rather more like John and Yoko's world of "Imagine" than the open-sided phenomenological triangle of the Pageaus. For the Pageaus' the periphery is that which expresses or embodies identity, while the "margin" is that which teases the edges of identity and is yet to be fully incorporated. Thus, the Pageaus' "margin" is less a periphery in GA's sense than a "periphery of the periphery." It is not clear in how these two concepts (periphery versus margin) would connect, and the similarity may be no more than superficial.

Another consideration is the "non-Girardian" substance and tenor of the symbolic worldview. Jonathan Pageau is very much aware of René Girard's thought, and is quite sympathetic, yet at the same time, he cannot see the symbolic meaning of sacrifice in the same way.[38] This is evident in his conversations with Girardians, most notably with Luke Burgis.[39] Though the dialogue was generous and friendly (Burgis was particularly insightful on the symbolic hierarchy of mimetic attention), the two perspectives seemed not to mesh particularly well around sacrifice and scapegoating. Pageau sees different kinds of sacrifice, including temple sacrifices in the Old Testament, as being qualitatively different in their purpose and symbolic meaning, not reducible to the sole meaning of the emissary victim.[40] This is also something that Eric Gans has also noted.[41] In my view, since Pageau's framework, like Girard's, is Christological, if he had a deeper grasp of mimetic theory (or, perhaps, if mimetic theory further clarified its theology), he would see that it is not incompatible with his own view—that Christ is implicated in all things, including all aspects of sacrifice. Yet this is not an easy thing to "get" from mimetic theory, since Girard's sacrificial focus is famously, and it often seems exclusively, on the frenzied crowd and its cathartic violence.

The divergence between Pageau and Girard on myth is actually much sharper, though I have not seen this issue discussed. [42] The recovery of the mythological imagination, including not only the bible but archetypal and mythical narrative in cinema, fairy tales, pop songs, or even computer games, is central to Pageau's project, while for Girard his approach to myth is *demythologization*. I feel that if Jonathan Pageau really comprehended what Girard propounds about myth he would be perplexed. Here, too, Eric Gans' view is closer to Pageau's, because he takes myths—we could even say respects myths—on their own terms, for what they accomplish imaginatively in terms of social cohesion and identity. This can be seen in his reflections on myths as treated by Levi-Strauss.[43] Thus, overall, an uneasiness with the Girardian framework, while by no means identical, is common both to the symbolic worldview and GA. Most importantly, neither can see the fundamentally positive nature of the sign and signification, attention, of meaning itself—the miracle of signification, as it were—as being reducible to the violence or the guilty conscience of scapegoating.

A final point, where GA and the symbolic view perhaps differ most sharply, and arguably (in the latter case) in a Girardian direction, is their view of modernity. Generally, GA sees itself as an extension of the project of modernity; it is in a sense doing the work of modernity, its best hope. This is represented by Eric Gans' constant (though never uncritical) reference to Francis Fukuyama's "end of history." [44] While GA sees unfavorable, even dire tendencies arising with modernity, it does not have a sense of an overarching crisis inherent to modernity *itself*, or specifically, a crisis of meaning, as do the Pageaus and associated thinkers.[45] For them, the atomization of society, the isolation of the individual, the fracturing of identity, and the attendant mental health crisis, are part of this "meaning crisis" or "metacrisis." They make a severe prognosis of modernity, which they see as crumbling around us, or at least receding. "Re-enchantment," in every sense both good and bad, is rushing in to fill the void, and the necessary response (among these thinkers) is to strengthen or re-engage the faculties of meaning, wisdom, imagination (as John and Yoko also seem to urge in their own way).

By contrast, GA seems less concerned about, for instance, the atomization of society, which in GA can be seen as an *adaptation* to modernity, or of modernity, where the public scene becomes the private scene.[46] For GA, modernity is something that needs to be salvaged and reinforced; for thinkers associated with the "metacrisis," modernity's collapse is

imminent or in progress, and humanity needs the inner resources to get through it. Girard's last great work *Battling to the End*, though its particulars are quite different, seems similar in its tenor and sweep.[47] GA, by contrast, resists apocalyptic prognostications rather strongly, especially Girard's. Nevertheless, and somewhat incompatibly, Eric Gans' *Chronicles* often take on a similar messianic tone, where recognition of the primacy of originary sign, of the scene of representation common to all humanity, is urged as the only means to save it.[48]

Thus, given my relentlessly critical analysis of "Imagine," it can be noted with irony that John and Yoko seem to have the last laugh. John and Yoko—along with generative anthropology, along with the Pageaus, and along with associated thinkers—all seem to come to a similar conclusion. We must learn to "imagine."

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friend Michael Cholewinski for his help in preparing this paper, and Eric Gans for his constant encouragement. All views and errors are my own.

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[18] N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2009). See also his helpful series, *Thinking through Salvation*, N.T. Wright Online, September 11, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnKOYjKz5us&list=PLXeyTV5HCr-AQSN7hrF0n76ZaiESII2wS>
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnKOYjKz5us&list=PLXeyTV5HCr-AQSN7hrF0n76ZaiESII2wS>) A number of Jonathan Pageau's videos at *The Symbolic World* expisit this rethinking of "heaven": "Christians Do Not 'Die and Go to Heaven,'" August 23, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RNWPkxTTx4>
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RNWPkxTTx4>) ; "Where is Heaven? A Response to Sam Harris," February 13, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVAPI-6fvRk> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVAPI-6fvRk>) ; "What Is the Kingdom of Heaven?" July 15, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iik5j3qNTqI>
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iik5j3qNTqI>) ; "There's a Difference Between 'Going to Heaven' and Eternal Life." September 7, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auURiaX0sk8>
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auURiaX0sk8>)

[19] See Jonathan Pageau, "There is No Literal Meaning," *The Symbolic World*. September 25, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VLPDSRL5f4> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VLPDSRL5f4>)

[20] Matthew Schneider, a GA scholar who has written much on the Beatles (*The Long and Winding Road from Blake to the Beatles*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), has emphasized the importance of the Playboy interview (personal communication). John first met Yoko after viewing her art installation expressing her philosophy of affirmation. See "Playboy Interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono," *Playboy* (January, 1981). Interview by David Sheff, September, 1980. Archived at *The Beatles Ultimate Experience*. <http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1980.jlpb.beatles.html>
(<http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1980.jlpb.beatles.html>)

[21] On "heaven" see again note 18. On "hell" see Jonathan Pageau, "What is Hell?" *The Symbolic World*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCWBufHFVWU> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCWBufHFVWU>)

[22] Note 18.

[23] John & Yoko/The Plastic Ono Band, "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)" (Apple Records, 1971). See again note 20.

[24] C.f., Isaiah 11:6-9.

[25] Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Basic Books, 2019).

[26] Girard's thesis on modernity developed in most of his major theoretical work as well as his literary studies. See *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins UP, 1979); *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); *Battling to the End*, trans. Mary Baker (Michigan State UP, 2010); *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); *Resurrection from Underground: Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, ed. and trans. James G. Williams (Crossroad, 1997); *Mimesis and Theory*. Ed. Robert Doran. (Stanford University Press, 2008).

[27] Holland (note 25), 488-497.

[28] See again Jonathan Pageau, "What Is Hell?" (note 21).

[29] Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007).

[30] C.f., Matthew 14:13-21.

[31] C.f., Acts 4:32-35.

[32] Note 5.

[33] "Convergence to Relevance Realization," Awakening from the Meaning Crisis. July 27, 2019. Video lecture series, Episode 28. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp6F80Nx0lc> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp6F80Nx0lc>)

[34] See McGilchrist's description of attention in *The Master and His Emissary* (Yale University Press, 2019), 164-169; see also "Beyond Materialism: The Matter with Things," The Symbolic World. July 13, 2022. Video discussion with Jonathan Pageau, 58:20-1:03:10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyBXqcgLAXs> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyBXqcgLAXs>)

[35] See Jonathan Pageau, "The Relevance of St. Maximus the Confessor Today," *The Symbolic World*. December 14, 2021. Video discussion with Fr. Maximos Costas. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze0Ps52NsVk> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze0Ps52NsVk>) ; "Divine Patterns in the Life of Moses," *The Symbolic World*. April 5, 2017. Video of lecture on St. Gregory of Nyssa given February, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-drIcL5bkpk> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-drIcL5bkpk>)

[36] Eric Gans, *The Origin of Language: A New Edition* (Spuyten Duyvil Publishing, 2019).

[37] Bishop Maximus Marretta usefully overviews this in his conversation with John Vervaeke. See "Eastern Christianity's unique resources for responding to the Meaning Crisis," John Vervaeke. February 2, 2023. Video interview, 7:30-16:12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsPQnFZWZM8> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsPQnFZWZM8>)

[38] "Why Humans Sacrifice." *The Symbolic World*. May 11, 2022. Video talk, 13:35-23:46.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njrlriUbSIc> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njrlriUbSIc>)

[39] "The Revenge of the Scapegoat," *The Symbolic World*. December 24, 2022. Video conversation with Luke Burgis.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fItOIHFQHbw> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fItOIHFQHbw>)

[40] René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (note 26).

[41] See for instance "Antisemitism, Scapegoating, Christianity and Judaism," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 728 (February 12, 2022) paragraphs 11-13. <https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw728/>

(<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw728/>)

[42] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (note 26).

[43] "Myths of Totemic Origin in Lévi-Strauss and Girard," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 409 (June 18, 2011).

<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw409/> (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw409/>)

[44] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Gans' engagement with Fukuyama's thesis is less an endorsement than a kind of shorthand to refer to liberal democracy and the market system in general. For representative examples, see "Ending History," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 174. July 7, 1999.

<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw174/> (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw174/>) ; "La

mondialisation," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 227. February 3, 2001.

<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw227/> (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw227/>) ; "Obama and Fukuyama," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 503. <https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw503/>

(<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw503/>) ; "The Realm of Freedom," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 498. October 10, 2015. **<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw498/>**
(<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw498/>) ; "Three Post Election Thoughts," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 527. **<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw527.htm>**
(<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw527.htm>)

[45] Zack Baker is a GA thinker who is in dialogue with figures connected with the "meaning crisis" and "re-enchantment." See the informative "Conversation with Gregg Henriques and Zack Baker," Jordan Hall. Video discussion.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kRpEZGnj78> (**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kRpEZGnj78>**)

[46] Eric Gans' treatment of the romantic, modern, and postmodern esthetic is seminal here, I think. See *Originary Thinking* (note 16), 164-219.

[47] Note 26.

[48] A recent Chronicle is representative: ". . . if we indeed share the desire for the continued flourishing of our species, the 'way of thinking' of the originary hypothesis will provide the anthropological basis of the solution." "The human as paradox and taboo," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no.797. February 2, 2024.

<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw797/> (**<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw797/>**)

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Last updated: March 22, 2024 at 10:16 pm

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