

## God's Plane

Has anyone else noticed that the Earl Grey tea from Starbucks smells like Froot Loops if it steeps for too long?

At 7am in the Reagan Airport, my consciousness was powered by ten sips of Froot Loop tea and three hours of sleep. Everything felt a little bit surreal— like I was walking through a world that is not quite there, not quite as it was, and not quite asleep. I try to wake up, but the TSA will not let me pass with my highly dangerous Froot Loop tea. Not that it mattered. No amount of Froot Loop tea could've prepared me for what someone's God had in store for me on American Airlines flight 0746 to Tampa, Florida.

Seat 17B. A middle seat in the no-elbow-room, economy class, cheap seats. A-OK with me, it's only a two-hour flight. First day of spring break and my best friend and I were off to throw wild parties with the sun-faded retirees at her parent's condo in St. Pete Beach. She snagged the aisle seat, 17C. She immediately put in her headphones and jacked them into a Nintendo DS to play KingdomHearts the whole flight. She cleverly put out a clear 'Don't Talk To Me' vibe. In contrast, I love talking to strangers. I always hope the stranger next to me on a plane wants to talk. People are so weird and wonderful and I think it's a shame we don't get to meet more of them in a lifetime.

17A was named Crystal. Mid 50s with her hair tied back in a tight bun, much like mine. She wanted to talk the moment she sat down. Small talk first, I didn't commit it to memory. But just as the seatbelt-fasten sign switched off, she looked out the window at the sun coming up over the East coast, she said, "That is a demonstration of the greatness of God. I just can't understand how someone could see this and not believe in God."

I am one of those people. However, I do try not to be an asshole in my daily life, so I swallowed my smirk and waited for her to change the subject.

Fifteen minutes and one forgettable subject later, she says, "So what do you know about heaven?"

Here we go. I couldn't think of a lie fast enough, so I stammered out, "Um. Actually, I'm an atheist."

Crystal tried to hide her disgust with a smile, but I saw horror flash across her face as the word came out of my mouth.

Crystal spent the entire remainder of the flight trying to save my soul.

She tried to explain to me that the only thing I have to do— the one simple, teensy-weensy, lil thing I have to do— is accept Jesus into my heart as my lord and savior. If I don't, apparently it's a one-way ticket to Hell. Just straight Hadestown. She tells me, "I don't want you down there— God doesn't want you down there with the devil and his demons."

"Yeah I do," scoffs God, lounging on the wing of the plane, "That queer bitch has a list of sins a mile long."

Bacchus<sup>1</sup> laughs from his reclining cloud, "Never stopped me! One man's sin is another man's worship." Bacchus enthusiastically swirls some clouds into the silhouette of a nude and rather full-figured woman. Feng Po Po<sup>2</sup> fans the crude sculpture away and glares at the grinning Greek. A handful of virility gods snicker like jocks in a high school locker room from a few feet higher in the clouds.

God<sup>3</sup> acknowledges Bacchus with a finger gun, "You make a good point. The only thing you really need to do to get into heaven is to be tight with my son. Wait, is that right?"

The Cailleach<sup>4</sup>, obscuring her decrepit face in a concentrated snow storm, scoffs at him, "Honestly, can't you keep your own rules straight? Make up your damn mind, I thought you had 10 conditions."

God shrugs, "I dunno. I've changed the rules so many damn times, I've lost track. I might be omnipotent, but every seven days I take a little nap, so I miss some things. Apparently, after 2000 years I'm cool with gay people now, so that was news to me."

"Like that book that Joseph Smith<sup>5</sup> Holy-Ghost-wrote for you in 1830? That one was a big shock to you." Brahma<sup>6</sup> climbs out of a cloud with all four of his arms and smirks at God with three of his four faces. His fourth face is distracted by a cloud that looks like a swan.

"Look, you can't prove I didn't write it."

"Can't prove you did either," Ahura Mazda<sup>7</sup> chimes in, lounging in mid-air, "C'mon now, you copied my content, surely you can't expect a mortal to be above copying yours."

“Nah, it’s all the same to me. I get more followers out of his sequel— and frankly, those ones are more enthusiastic and way better dressed. And they have a sick musical. I love musicals.” God says with jazz hands.

I wanted to put in my headphones. I wanted to change the subject, let the new subject die, put in my headphones and play “Kinky Neighbors” by The Wet Spots on repeat until we land. Instead, Crystal told me that God was directing her to talk to me at that moment. She said that she was trying to sleep, but God kept whispering in her ear to talk to the girl in the middle seat. She told me that God is trying to reach me to bring me into His light.

Demeter<sup>8</sup> sighs, “I just wanted you to have a pleasant conversation, Crystal.” She recrosses her legs atop a pillar of clouds, “You have some things in common with her mother, I just wanted you to talk about wigs and amusement parks. Try the common ground. Not everyone wants to be converted to Christianity.”

She shoots a pointed look at Jesus<sup>9</sup>. Every pagan God from Akka<sup>10</sup> to Xolotl<sup>11</sup> raises a glass. Jesus was too busy answering fan mail to notice.

When Crystal said God was whispering to her, my skin crawled. I have a life-long friend who developed psychosis in high school, and hears voices in her head as a result. She thinks God speaks directly to her. Her dad, who is passively religious, takes her mental health very seriously, so she sees good doctors to address the voices. Her mom, who she was very close to before she passed, was very spiritual. They belong to an Episcopalian church.

When she told her pastor that she was hearing the voice of God, her pastor proclaimed it was a good thing— a sign of healing! A pastor affirmed to this mentally ill woman that the voice in her head telling her to play pranks on her family is the voice of God. Tell me that’s not batshit crazy. That is a self-proclaimed representative of God actively harming someone I care about.

“If you miss Heaven, you’re guaranteed not to miss Hell,” Crystal repeated no less than 15 times. With a smile I’m sure she thought was reassuring, she said, “The way you don’t miss Heaven is through Jesus Christ. There is one God, and you can find him in Jesus Christ.”

Every God that has ever lived and died simultaneously looks into the window of row 17 as if it were the camera on *The Office*.

God laughs, “Hear that, guys? I am the one and only God! Could you even imagine?”

“You realize you’re just me, right? I was doing you before they invented you.” Mithras<sup>12</sup> sulks on the edge of a wispy cloud.

“And you copied *me!*” Horus<sup>13</sup> laughs, “Get used to it kiddo, mortals are fickle! Every few thousand years they make a new version of us. Sooner or later they’ll stop believing in him too.” He nods at God, who’s sprawled out on the wing.

“Don’t be bitter because all of your followers came to me.” God says, folding his arms beneath his head.

“Pssh, ‘Came to you’ my beak, all my followers are long since dead. You converted their children.”

“Same difference, at least my followers are alive. As long as they live, I live.”

Only one God? That’s plainly untrue. There have been thousands of Gods throughout history. So I wondered: Are Gods like Tinkerbell? The audience claps hard enough and the God lives? They’re alive and real if their audience believes hard enough?

Every God that’s ever lived was real and powerful to someone. But the once mighty Poseidon has now been reduced to a character in a YA series. If I write a play mocking the ancient Gods, no one would find it offensive, because those Gods are only mythology. If I write an essay that is slightly unflattering to the Christian God, that’s offensive because that God is not mythology. The followers are alive, that’s what counts. I recall all the Gods that have died because all of their followers died or converted, and I see there isn’t a single thing that makes Crystal’s God more real than Zeus<sup>14</sup>.

Crystal pulled out her iPhone, truly one of God’s best creations, and opened her BibleGateway app. I can’t place it, but that seems like it should be sacrilegious— your Holy text

in app form nestled between ParkingPanda and Flappy Bird. Your Holy text prohibits a polyester blend, but this is chill? I don't get it.

My raised eyebrow aside, if Crystal were to convince me to believe in the supernatural at any point in the flight, this was it. When Crystal opened her iBible, it opened directly to the story of Hannah. That's me. She either left off on that story before she got on the plane, or the app chose a page at random. Regardless of how it happened, it was unsettling. Crystal proceeded to tell me the story of this biblical Hannah.

This elder Hannah tried and tried for a child, but it was not until she prayed to God and promised to immediately return her son to Him—to be clear, return in the form of a dedicated servant and not as a dead baby, because honestly I initially misunderstood— that she was able to conceive the baby that went on to be the Prophet Samuel. After Samuel, she had five other kids. God cured her infertility. As Crystal told me this allegory for the power of prayer, I was a little bit shaken. Hannah the Nazarite and I have something in common that Crystal couldn't know about. I have Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, which causes fertility problems. One of my deepest, most rational fears is that I will never be able to have my own kids. Maybe ye olde Hannah had it too.

So what the fuck do I do with that?

In my heart of hearts, I still do not believe in a God. I do not believe in miracles. I do not believe in fate. I feel a loose kinship with ye olde Hannah, whom I interpret to be a fictional character, so what? I've felt kinship with other characters. The coincidence of the context is the only reason I trip. I do not believe in the power of prayer— but I am reminded why some people do believe. People encounter insurmountable problems every day. No one wants to feel useless, people will do whatever they can to feel like they're helping themselves. IVF is a relatively new treatment for infertility, before that what else could one do but pray?

Ixchel<sup>15</sup> knocks on the window of the plane, "I'm sorry, okay!? It's not my fault I was assigned floods, disasters, and childbirth! Sometimes I get the wires crossed! Just be patient!"

"No, please, keep mixing up disasters with childbirth, you make my job so much easier," wryly remarks The Morrigan<sup>16</sup>, shrouded in a gray storm cloud. "If you kill them right out the pink gate, I don't have to make them kill each other later. One less step for me."

Ixchel narrows her eyes at her, “Piss off— Who asked you? Don’t you belong down there anyway?”

The Morrigan rolls her black, beady eyes, “Down where? Auschwitz, Germany? Aleppo, Syria? Christchurch, New Zealand? Mortals don’t even need me anymore, they can kill each other just fine. All we have to do is sit and watch while they fight over us.”

“In the underworld! In Xibalba<sup>17</sup>!”

“I never made a Hell, I didn’t think the mortals needed one when they had each other.”

“Ladies, please,” God says, “I’m trying to eavesdrop. Omnipotence demands concentration.”

Crystal asked what I’m studying. I told her screenwriting. She enthusiastically recommended the film *A Case for Christ*. I knew the film, but as she explained it, “It’s the true story of an investigative reporter who proved historically, scientifically, mathematically, and anthropologically that God is real despite his own atheism.” That’s close enough to what the film is but here’s what Crystal probably doesn’t know about that movie. It was produced by PureFlix, a production and distribution company that explicitly makes exclusively pro-Christian propaganda films, such as *God’s Not Dead* and *Heaven is for Real*. The studio is headed by David A.R. White, a religious fanatic, son of a Mennonite pastor who built his film career making for profit (prophet?) films about his specific religious views. This film is not true, it is propaganda. But the fact that people like Crystal are seeing this film and interpreting it as truth despite its blatant bias is frightening.

God stands, “Their films can’t be all wrong, I sure don’t feel dead!” He stretches his arms up, and cannonballs off the wing of the plane into a puff of cloud.

“Give it time.” Horus says.

I try to be patient and polite. I listen to people who have different beliefs than I do. However, if Crystal can sit down for two hours and explain to me, a captive stranger, why my

worldview is wrong, would I really be the asshole for contradicting her in a conversation I didn't start?

If Jorge the Preacher can stand on GMU's campus and publicly cry that I'm a whore, destined to burn in Hell because I passed by in a short skirt, am I the asshole for saying Hell isn't real?

If religious institutions can try to convert people to their religion (as they have been doing daily since religion was conceived), why would I be the asshole if I tried to convert them to an atheistic belief?

Since the dawn of mankind, humans have been willing to kill and die in the name of religion. Crusades. Holy wars. Religious persecution. From the Massacre of the Cathars to a mass shooting at a mosque in New Zealand to the fucking Holocaust; An unspeakable number of lives have been lost because humans will murder each other if they believe differently. People have suffered because they don't believe, people have suffered because they do believe.

Trying to teach tolerance of all religions is the best we can do because now we're in too deep. The concept of religion can't be magically erased. I argue that if man had never conceived of a God in the first place, the entire world would be better off. While I believe people would be better off everyone stopped participating in all forms of religion, Crystal believes that people would be better off if they believed in her specific God. Some people see a living God, I see some cool stories a lot of people made up over time, like the worlds' most fucked up game of telephone. Crystal kept talking. I kept quiet.

The plane landed in Tampa twenty minutes early. A miracle by the grace of American Airlines. I thanked Crystal for taking the time to share her religion with me. I told her that her congregation is lucky to have someone so passionate to worship with them. I lied and say that I'd watch *A Case for Christ*. I got off the plane. The world felt more real than it did at cruising altitude. I still believe that there is no God in the sky.

## Whom the Fuck Was She Talking About?

<sup>1</sup> Bacchus— (Greek: Dionysus; Etruscan: Fufluns) Roman God of grapes, wine-making, wine, fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy. In essence, the God of personal freedom and wild parties. Lived 500 BCE— 1000 CE, with assorted attempted revivals world wide since then.

<sup>2</sup> Feng Po Po— Chinese Wind Deity, often depicted as an old crone. Lived in the minds of her followers approximately 2700 BCE— 1040 BCE.

<sup>3</sup> God— In this piece, God is meant to be the Judeo-Christian God, because he goes by no other name, except perhaps “the holy spirit” or “the holy ghost,” but even that varies by sect. Technically, this God belongs to multiple religions despite the fact that he is interpreted a different kind of character depending on who you ask. Lived 530 BCE— Present.

<sup>4</sup> The Cailleach— A Gaelic deity. Depicted as an old hag, she was a creator goddess and the goddess of weather. In Scotland, she is the Queen of Winter. Lived 500 BCE— 500 CE.

<sup>5</sup> Joesph Smith— The American dude who founded Mormonism in the 1820s in New York. He was actually alive, 1805 – 1844 CE.

<sup>6</sup> Brahma — Hindu creator God. Traditionally depicted with four faces and four arms, but there are modern variants. He rode on the back of a swan, apparently most hindu deities had a noble steed of some sort . Directly from Wikipedia, “According to some, Brahma does not enjoy popular worship in present-age Hinduism and has lesser importance than the other members of the Trimurti, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is revered in ancient texts, yet rarely worshiped as a

primary deity in India.” Yet there are still a handful of active temples dedicated to him, she lived late 1st millennium BCE — Present.

<sup>7</sup> Ahura Mazda— Sole God worshipped in Zoroastrianism, wise and good creator of all things. There are other spirits, but no other Gods in this religion. Ahura Mazda himself appears in other religions as well, including Manichaeism and Sogdian Buddhism. Lived 550 BCE — Present.

<sup>8</sup> Demeter— Greek Goddess of the harvest, fertility, motherhood, sacred law, and agriculture. She also presided over the cycle of life and death. Lived 500 BCE — 1000 CE.

<sup>9</sup> Jesus— Christian figure, son of God. Doesn't appear until the New Testament in Christian Holy texts. Supposedly died to wash away the sins of mankind, but even that is up for debate among different sects. Likely actually lived 4 BCE — 36 CE, presently still lives (but in the abstract) according to his followers.

<sup>10</sup> Akka— Sami ( A Finnish and Estonian ancient religion) Goddess of fertility and thunder (In this religion, thunder was the sound of Gods banging). Lived 3200 BCE — 800 BCE .

<sup>11</sup> Xolotl— Aztec underworld guard dog. God of lightning, fire, sickness, deformity, and misfortune. Head of a dog, his body is a weird amalgamation of man and dog. Executioner of other Gods. Lived 1345 CE — 1521 CE.

<sup>12</sup> Mithras— A Persian deity worshiped by his own secret cult in the first century from Persia to Rome. He was also known as “Mithra.” Very mysterious, little is known about the cult which practiced in caves. But as his story goes, he was also born to a virgin, was a traveling teacher,

performed miracles, had disciples, sacrificed himself for others, died and was resurrected, and was in many other ways Just Like Jesus. Lived 1 CE— 400 CE.

<sup>13</sup> Horus— Egyptian Deity. This one is fun because he had two incarnations, an “older” and a “younger.” They were still functionally the same, though the younger version had more similarities to Jesus in the way that people worshiped him. He also had a specific cult known as ‘The Followers of Horus.’ He was directly linked to the Pharaoh. Lived 6000 BCE — 350 BCE.

<sup>14</sup> Zeus— Greek king of Gods. Huge douche, known rapist. Often re-flavored for modern works of fiction intended for children like Disney’s *Hercules*. Lived 500 BCE — 1000 CE.

<sup>15</sup> Ixchel— Mayan Goddess of childbirth, midwifery, medicine and fertility. She was sometimes depicted as a very young woman and sometimes a very old woman, or a jaguar, but no in-between. Lived 250 CE — 900 CE.

<sup>16</sup> The Morrigan— Irish deity. Called “The Phantom queen,” The Morrigan is a goddess of war and fate, she foretells doom, death or victory in battle. She incites warriors to battle. She encourages warriors to do brave deeds that often lead to their own demise. Often portrayed washing the bloodstained clothes of those fated to die. Lived 500 BCE — 500 CE.

<sup>17</sup> Xibalba— The Mayan underworld. Not strictly a Hell, but sure wasn’t a Heaven. Open for business 250 CE — 900 CE.