

FIRING LINE: A GUIDE FOR THE 20TH CENTURY PAGAN

Host: **William F. Buckley, Jr.**

Guest: **Mortimer J. Adler**

Examiner: **Jeff Greenfield**

Part 2 of 2

ADLER: No. The subtitle of that book—the subtitle the publishers gave it—is *A Guide for the 20th Century Pagan*. I wanted to call it *An Introduction to Theology for the 20th Century Pagan*. And the reason I used the word “pagan” is that one of the definitions of pagan in *Webster’s Dictionary* is one who does not worship the God of Christians, Jews and Muslims. Now those who worship obviously worship on the basis of faith, not on the basis of philosophical reason. So I wanted to stay within what could be said to pagans without any appeal to faith, and then say—what one can say to pagans without any appeal to faith is just this: It isn’t entirely, shall I say, dismissible, because the God whose existence I have given reason to believe in has many traits in common with the God that

is worshipped. Not all. Many. Too, if the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not infinite, not omnipotent, not omniscient, not alive, not intelligent, not the exnihilitating creator, then the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be utterly different. But that's not so. They converge, but don't meet. That's the gap that Pascal was talking about—that chasm between the God of the philosophers—Now, he turned his back. Being of profoundly religious faith he had no need of the God of the philosophers. I'm saying that I think persons of profound faith have some need to know that their faith is reasonable, though they go beyond what is reasonable. That is the answer to the agnostic. The person of profound faith still should be proud and happy to know that what he holds by faith has reasonable grounds even though what he holds by faith exceeds what one can say by reasonable grounds. That's the essence of what I'm trying to say.

BUCKLEY: In other words, the scaffolding is there—the intellectual scaffolding is there—and faith supplies, so to speak, the facade.

ADLER: It puts the flesh and blood on it.

BUCKLEY: The flesh and blood on it, yes. Now, in the case of Pascal, there was a conscious rejection of the challenge to bridge the two, was there not?

ADLER: He just was on the other—

BUCKLEY: The call of the faithful—

ADLER: He said, “I'm on the other side of the chasm, and I don't care about their side at all,” you see.

BUCKLEY: And what successor has attempted this chasm?

ADLER: I don't, you see—if I may be immodest a moment—In the modern world philosophers fall into two groups. They've either been pagans like Hume and the 20th century agnostic philosophers who argue that God's existence can't be proved, that God is an illegitimate notion, and there is no valid argument for God's existence. In other words, the philosophers who are purely philosophers and pagans have been adverse—negative. On the other hand, there are modern philosophers who are Christians and Jews who have, in thinking about God and in arguing for God's existence, have allowed the light of faith to add to their philosophy

what doesn't belong there. They have, shall I say, illegitimately introduced into their philosophical thought something that they borrowed from their faith.



BUCKLEY: And in that sense have become sacred theologians?

ADLER: That's right. And what I've tried to do—and I think I'm almost alone in this—is while standing with the pagans, in the sense that I allow no light of faith to intrude upon my thought, I've been positive rather than negative, affirmative rather than adverse. And I think that is a very important thing to achieve.

BUCKLEY: Yes. Yes. Now can you account for the apparent lack of curiosity on the subject? It is, of course, the paramount question.

ADLER: Well, curiously enough, that's not my—

BUCKLEY: Why is it that so many people who are ostensibly educated have devoted so very little thought to this question? I doubt if the typical doctored teacher has ever heard of Anselm.

ADLER: Let's leave academics out for a moment.

BUCKLEY: Okay.

ADLER: My experience is the other way, Bill. In the last 30 years I have from time to time in various parts of the country given lectures on the existence of God, always to standing room only audiences. Last summer in Aspen, while I was writing this book, I announced three lectures and set them on a Wednesday, Thursday and Friday afternoon at four o'clock—brilliantly sunny afternoons in June when the trout streams in the mountains and the golf course and the tennis courts were beckoning. I had filled—in fact I had to move from a smaller to a larger auditorium—and I had to repeat the lectures a second time to accommodate the—

BUCKLEY: That sounds like Abelard.

ADLER: Well, the interesting thing is that this is the most far—Academics may turn their backs on it, but I assure you that the populace in general is avid on this question.

BUCKLEY: Well then, let's examine the narrower question. Why are the academics insouciant?

ADLER: They have been—

BUCKLEY: Is it sloth? Fashion?

ADLER: No. I think they've been corrupted—I have to say they've been corrupted by modern thought. They've been corrupted by Hume and Kant and the whole line of doubters who have never understood the conditions of the argument and how to do it. I mean, the errors I've talked about are errors that pervade the academic mind, and so they think it's a closed book. And the philosophers whom they admire have argued that this is beyond reason's power to do—

BUCKLEY: They admire Aristotle, don't they?

ADLER: Not generally. (laughing) I wish they did. I wish they did. Not generally.

BUCKLEY: What was it that Kant meant when he referred to the difficulties that the agnostics had with the physico-teleological argument?

ADLER: Well, I think the argument from design—I think most of the arguments that have been given for God's existence are faulty.

That's why I said the only—insufficient. The reason behind my saying that is the inadequate or defective arguments come from asking the wrong questions. The questions I said—There are lots of questions to which God may be the answer but need not be.

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: When you build an argument in answer to a question to which God may be the answer but need not be, you've got a faulty or insufficient argument. You've got to find the question to which God is the only possible answer, and that is the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" I think that's simple and clear.

BUCKLEY: Yes. And is there any reason why the natural curiosity of the academics does not turn to a more rigorous examination of this question? Is it something that they tend to fear because of its—

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY:—awful abstruseness?

ADLER: I don't think it's so much that it's abstruse. In academic circles theology is an unfashionable subject, at least the kind of strict philosophical theology that I'm talking about. You'll recall in the '60s that furor about the death of God. That the academics just lapped up. Of course, the most extraordinary thing is how that has completely disappeared. I have two shelves of books that have been dropped into nothingness—where they belong, as a matter of fact. (laughter)

BUCKLEY: Except that you can't annihilate them. (laughter)

ADLER: Yes. (laughing)

BUCKLEY: And your point being that it was simply an intellectual fad.

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: Well now, is there a sign of any reversal? I remember Will Herberg was always talking about a reawakening of interest at all levels in religion. Do you see that happening? Will your book, for instance, engage the attention of the academic community?

ADLER: I'm hoping so. I'm pretty sure it will engage the attention of the general public because of my experience in lectures. I'm hoping—and this is a slender hope—that the clarity, and, I think, persuasiveness of the reasoning done there in the explanation of why Anselm's argument is wrong as an argument for the existence of God, the explanation why Kant's strictures now no longer hold—

BUCKLEY: Wrong, but heuristic.



ADLER: That's right—will prevail. And since my claims for natural theology are not exorbitant—I don't attempt to prove that I've given reason for believing in the Christian God or the Jewish God because, as I say, there's a leap there. I think the academic community would react very negatively if I—if anyone—claimed by reason and reason alone, one could establish a grounds for believing in the God worshipped and loved by religious Jews, Muslims and Christians.

BUCKLEY: Well—

ADLER: I don't do that.

BUCKLEY: What you're saying is that you wouldn't undertake to do it, but—

ADLER: I don't think it can be done.

BUCKLEY:—but you—Well—

ADLER: I don't think it can be done.

BUCKLEY: Well, I think—I happen to think it can be done and has been done—people like C.S. Lewis and Chesterton—it seems to me that after reading them, I personally believe that it becomes unreasonable to suppose the opposite. There are arguments that are historical and empirical—for the reincarnation, for instance.

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: Now, your book is very philosophically meticulous in insisting that—in telling the reader—that you're not going to assert anything the proof of which is not made by the integrity of your own philosophical arguments.

ADLER: That's correct.

BUCKLEY: And, therefore, you hope that its discreet appeal will make it inoffensive to people who want to continue to refuse to make Pascal's leap.

ADLER: That's correct. I think that's a very good—I mean, that's a perfect statement of my intention. I hope I've succeeded in carrying it out.

BUCKLEY: I think you have. Mr. Jeff Greenfield is an author, television commentator, graduate of the Yale Law School. He has a book coming out in June, the title of which I forget.

MR. GREENFIELD: It's *Playing to Win*.

BUCKLEY: *Playing to Win*. Sorry.

GREENFIELD: You can't deduce much theology from it. It's about politics. Dr. Adler, let me just see if we can clear some ground first. The proof that you think you make here is not a demonstration of a God with specific intentions toward man. Would that be correct?

ADLER: Right.



GREENFIELD: All right. So that much of the questions that have raised in the past about what God's will is toward us is swept aside in this.

ADLER: Not swept aside. Swept aside is not quite right. I think it's one of the most important questions of all, but I can't reach them by reason alone.

GREENFIELD: So that there are a whole range of issues in which we are used to hearing God invoked about which you say, "Not provable." Yes?

ADLER: I—Could I—

GREENFIELD: Well, let me show you what I mean.

ADLER: Could I just remove that word provable, because as I said to Bill a little earlier, the word "proof" is a mathematical word.

GREENFIELD: Fair enough.

ADLER: Let's say reasonable rather than proof.

GREENFIELD: Okay. But whether one should be celibate before marriage because God wants us to is not—

ADLER: Not within my domain.

GREENFIELD: Right. Okay. (laughter) Whether God wants to ban the teaching of evolution—none of these things are in your domain. Okay.

ADLER: Interesting, but not in my domain.

GREENFIELD: Yes, I understand that. Not uninteresting. (laughter) Indeed, what I think Mr. Buckley was after is a question which I would have thought was not in your domain either. Specifically, it is conceivable to imagine a God who created a universe in which man did not have a soul. No?

ADLER: It is conceivable for the universe to exist without man being in it.

GREENFIELD: Yes.

ADLER: It is conceivable for the universe to exist with man being in it without an immortal soul. If the word “soul” simply means to be alive, then all potatoes have souls—(laughter)

GREENFIELD: Yes.

ADLER:—but the immortal soul is something else again.

GREENFIELD: Yes, that

ADLER: That’s right.

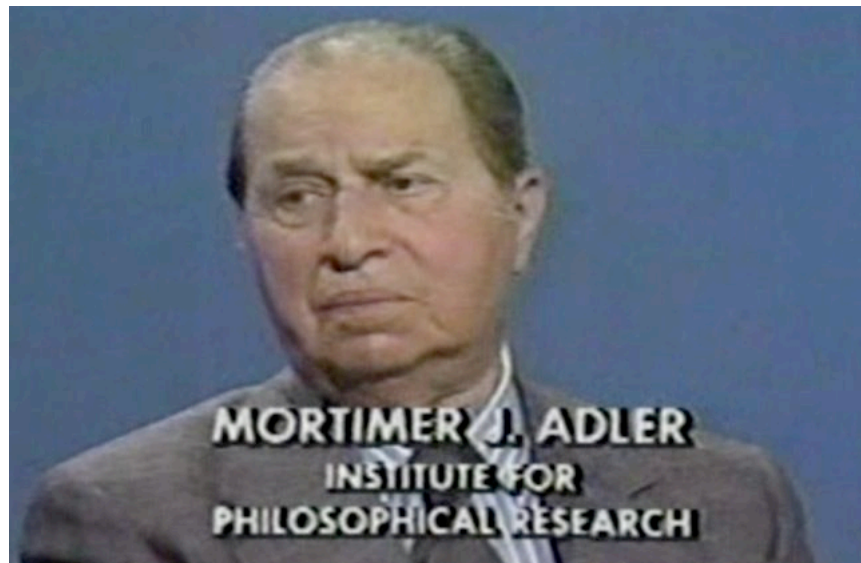
GREENFIELD: Okay. So I think it’s just important to have brought this down to where—

ADLER: Absolutely. My whole effort is to minimize my—You see, may I say, as I said to Mr. Buckley, natural theology has brought upon itself, I think, some adverse reactions because it’s claimed too much.

GREENFIELD: Fair enough.

ADLER: I want to claim modestly only what I think can be done clearly.

GREENFIELD: Now I want to explore those modest claims in the light of what you may regard as an apposite analogy. Child psychologists tell us that in an early stage of development infants attribute to their parents all sorts of attributes which they later discover to be untrue. For example—I cannot tell you how they come to this conclusion—but child psychologists tell us that at a certain early age of development infants believe that their parents can be made to appear and disappear by an act of will. In other words, the infant believes that their hunger brings the parent into existence.



ADLER: That's a power on the part of the infant, not an attribute of the parent.

GREENFIELD: Well, but it's what the infant—That's true. At any—That's right. But that comes after the stage when the infants believe their parents are sort of—I guess god-like is the only way I can put it. That is, they believe—

ADLER: I wish my children thought that of me. (laughter)

GREENFIELD: That's a later stage. (laughter) In infancy they tend to believe their parents dwell everywhere and are omnipotent because their needs are answered. What I'm—I guess; what I'm getting at—is whether it is conceivable that the questions that you are addressing—the questions about the nature of existence out of

nothingness—is a concept that is so far beyond us that the conclusions that you draw might at some other date be invalidated.

ADLER: I don't think so. And I don't think so because you and I and everybody else uses the word "exists" or "is"—there's no commoner word in any language than the ontological predicate "is" or "is not"—you and I day in and day out say that is or that does not exist, and when we say something does not exist we are thinking of nothing in its place sometimes. So I think the concept of being and not being or existence and nothingness are, shall I say, part of the very heart of human thinking.

GREENFIELD: Well, but you see what interests me—

ADLER: And you can't think without it, so I don't think we'll go beyond it.

GREENFIELD: That's possible, but in a sense—and I don't think I'm using this word invidiously—there's almost a sort of arrogance in this sense: There was a time when people believed that if there were sunspots on the sun, that was impossible, and it was impossible because God would not create such a thing. That's why Galileo had to recant.

ADLER: That's superstitious thinking, yes.

GREENFIELD: Yes, but that's exactly my point. From our perspective it's superstitious. From that time period, it was a matter of demonstrable theology.

ADLER: Mr. Greenfield, I don't think that time is going to affect the line of difference between superstition and rational thought. Either—when I go through the argument that you've heard me go through with Mr. Buckley—

GREENFIELD: Right.

ADLER:—either your own mind—I can't appeal to anything but your own mind—either as you, hear that, your mind says, "Yes, I can think"—If I say to you, "Can you think of God as anything less than the Supreme Being? Do you want to think of God—When you use the word 'god,' do you want to think of an inferior being? A being than which there is a superior?" I don't think you would use the word "god" that way. I'm appealing to you—

BUCKLEY: He'd excogitate him out of existence.

ADLER: That's right. So that the steps I've asked you to take, I can only appeal to your reason or anybody's else's reason—

GREENFIELD: Well, you couldn't appeal to him at all if he were, say, a solipsist, could you?

ADLER: I wouldn't try.

BUCKLEY: Or even a nihilist.



ADLER: I wouldn't try. If he's a solipsist, I don't want to exist in his universe. (laughing)

GREENFIELD: Yes, but you know that—But, Mr. Buckley, you know the answer to that, where a woman ran up to Bertrand Russell in his solipsist phase and said, “Thank God, I thought I was the only one.” (laughter) I'm not dealing with that. What I'm dealing with—

ADLER: I don't think he's a solipsist.

GREENFIELD: What I'm dealing with—

BUCKLEY: He's—As I understand it, he's saying, can't you, hypothetically, assume an intellectual state in which that which you ac-

cept as axiomatic is rejected.

GREENFIELD: Disproven. Is disproven.

ADLER: No.

BUCKLEY: And I think—The answer is, I can't either.

GREENFIELD: All right. So that—Okay, but that—The reason why I come at it from this viewpoint is because you've now—

ADLER: I'm arrogant to that extent.

GREENFIELD: Right. So that all the past mistakes that theologians have made—all the past errors by which people have deduced what must be—are not affected by your argument here. Is this correct?

ADLER: I think not. And by the way, the great theologians do not harbor any of that superstitious nonsense that you're attributing to children and popular—

GREENFIELD: No, but as I recall—

ADLER: No one has ever—The great theologians of the past are not superstitious—

GREENFIELD: As I recall, and I may be—

BUCKLEY: What about the great philosophers, though?

ADLER: They're not superstitious. I mean I think—

BUCKLEY: What about the notion that a tree makes no noise when it falls unless someone is there to hear it?

ADLER: That's a sophomore proposition that no great philosopher I think, ever really—

BUCKLEY: Didn't Berkeley believe that?

ADLER: Berkeley held the position that "esse est percipi"—"to be is to be perceived," and certainly there is this sense in which it is true: that the objects of our experience exist in our experience. Berkeley's further reasoning was that—

BUCKLEY: Is frivolous.

ADLER: Yes.

GREENFIELD: But I'm thinking—

ADLER: Berkeley's further reasoning was that what we—that we can't go beyond our experience to objects that exist outside our experience is invalid.

GREENFIELD: I was thinking, for instance—and I may be misplacing the theologian—it's been a while—but that. St. Anselm begins by beseeching God to help him in his project.

ADLER: St. Anselm was a religious person—

GREENFIELD: Right. Now—

ADLER:—and he does—

BUCKLEY: That's why he was a saint. (laughter)

ADLER: By the way, he begins the argument on his knees in prayer. There's no question about it.

GREENFIELD: That's what I mean. A modern day thinker—or a modern day person—looking at that is entitled to say—Well, it seems to me he may be in a different ballpark than you're in, obviously.

ADLER: No. But, you see, the interesting thing is, though I'm not a saint—

GREENFIELD: Not yet.

ADLER: No, and it would be unsaintly even to aspire to be a saint—

BUCKLEY: It's unsaintly to aspire to be a saint.

ADLER: (laughing) Yes.

GREENFIELD: Bill, can I ask you a question about this, because I— It seems to me that this must ultimately dissatisfy you, you know— the nature of coming to rest at this conclusion.

BUCKLEY: No. It doesn't dissatisfy me because it seems to me that it is by no means incorrect to take on a discrete task, and that is the philosophical task that Professor Adler has undertaken. The fact that his conclusions are compatible with my Christian faith is pleasing to me. Now, there remains the nexus which he undertakes not to supply.

ADLER: That's right.

BUCKLEY: But he does not deny that it is suppliable—

ADLER: That's right.

BUCKLEY:—though it would be with reference to a different philosophical vocabulary, a vocabulary that may or may not rest in part on faith and, to a certain extent, on reason and—



GREENFIELD: But you see what—

BUCKLEY:—empirical experience.

ADLER: There is a lovely little essay by Augustine entitled *The Merit of Believing*.” There is no merit in believing if believing doesn’t go beyond what can be established by reason—

BUCKLEY: Right.

GREENFIELD: But isn’t that—

BUCKLEY: Even as Yusuf said, only the man who believes can genuinely be tolerant.

ADLER: Correct.

GREENFIELD: But isn’t—Aren’t you now back—

BUCKLEY: But if he doesn’t believe, there’s nothing to be intolerant about.

ADLER: Correct.

GREENFIELD: Aren’t you now at the barrier that so many people in today’s world face, which is you can prove or—I’m sorry. You can—

ADLER: Argue and give reasonable grounds.

GREENFIELD:—bring us to this conclusion, but at the point when it begins to make a difference in our lives, it doesn’t help much. In other words, the old—you might call them sophomoric notions—the questions that a bright 18-year-old begins to ask: “If God exists, why does he permit X?” These things aren’t answered at all in this.

ADLER: You are entitled to say, after you’ve read my book, “What of it?”

GREENFIELD: Yes. That’s what I mean.

ADLER: And I’m going to answer that question, because I think it’s a good question, and I think there’s a good answer to it. What of it? The negative answer: It will not solve the questions that are the crucial questions in your life. The questions of whether God is to be sought in prayer for help and you ought to rely on God’s grace for your virtues. What it does, though, is to say this: If I do believe

in God religiously, am I entirely in a world of unreason? Have I exercised a faith that is—

BUCKLEY: Childlike.

ADLER:—childlike. There are two medieval maxims I'd like to state in Latin first. Tertullian said, "Credo nisi absurdum est"—"I believe even if it's absurd;" then went on to say, "Credo quia absurdum est"—"I believe because it is absurd." I think that's wrong. I think to say that I believe because it is absurd—even though it's absurd it's all right—but it need not be absurd. What I believe can have an insufficient ground reason, and so it is—I think the what of it is to know what that leap of faith is.

GREENFIELD: Okay.

BUCKLEY: And nobody likes to be intellectually *infra dig*.

ADLER: That's right. That's right.

BUCKLEY: That's a very important point.

GREENFIELD: I think the area that I'm thinking of—very quickly, if we have the time for it—is that—To turn on the evening news the other night in New York and see a funeral service for a mother and her five children who were killed in a fire, and to hear the minister say, "God looked down from heaven and said, 'I need these people.'" I mean, that is almost obscene, isn't it, in the sense there is—

BUCKLEY: No, I don't think it's obscene at all.

GREENFIELD: All right. I will assert it. To me that is an obscene notion, and one that I would assume that—I can't draw any comfort—

BUCKLEY: Well, I think you should use a more precise word than "obscene."

ADLER: Yes. Obscene isn't the right word.

GREENFIELD: Well, I think I meant it as—

ADLER: Gratuitous—

BUCKLEY: Or profane.

GREENFIELD: Offensive?

BUCKLEY: Profane.

GREENFIELD: Offensive?

BUCKLEY: Oh well, yes, anything can be offensive.

ADLER: You do really have to be tolerant of what happens in funeral oratory. I mean, after all, the minister—the priest—

BUCKLEY: Lapidarian inscriptions are not written on the—

ADLER:—is trying to comfort the grieving.

GREENFIELD: But what I'm saying is that the kind of question that occurs to someone in the face of that tragedy and then to be told that it's God's will is nothing with which you are concerned in your exercise.

ADLER: I cannot say that, you see. I mean, I think the important thing to know is how far philosophy will take you. Let me put it another way. Philosophy at its best produces a shell into which faith can be poured; but it's a shell, and that shell is nothing to depend upon for one's, shall I say, the direction of one's life. But without that shell, faith is without foundation in anything that belongs to reason in the world of our experience.

GREENFIELD: But if the faith into which you are pouring the shell—

ADLER: No, not—The shell into which you are pouring the faith.

GREENFIELD: I'm sorry. It's the faith which you are pouring into the shell—wrong preposition—is as difficult to maintain, given the real world, with or without that shell, then what is the purpose as it affects us? Just to give a foundation for a general notion that God can exist?

ADLER: I would say, pointing to my friend here, Bill Buckley, that he lives in the same real world you do. He knows how horrible it

is, in many respects, how irrational and brutal, and I don't think it weakens his faith. I don't see any signs, and I don't see why it should weaken his faith. The inscrutability of God's providence—We are not—Milton's efforts to justify the ways of God to man are not proper, I think. We shouldn't try to do that. We should—If we have faith in God's love and benevolence, we must try to understand that this difficult world in which we live is still within God's providence. The man of faith can do that. I don't think he's disturbed by it. As a philosopher I can't explain it, and I'm not called upon—I mean, as a philosopher I cannot move into the realm in which the questions—



BUCKLEY: That's right.

ADLER: That's right. But I don't see why that defect—to admit that defect—is a very important thing—to admit that deficiency.

GREENFIELD: Because my assumption is the reason why people crowd lecture halls to hear lectures about God is less a philosophical exercise than a search—

ADLER: You're quite right.


GREENFIELD:—for some kind of faith or comfort in the cold world.

ADLER: You're quite right. I think I've cheated them. I think they

come hoping for more than I'm going to give them. On the other hand, they don't castigate me for that. Though they expected more, they are, I think, pleased to have the little I can give.

BUCKLEY: Well, they also go to you as to a virtuoso, so there's that which is a pleasing note on which to end the hour. Thank you, very much, Dr. Adler—

ADLER: Thank you.

BUCKLEY:—the author of *How to Think about God*; Mr. Greenfield; ladies and gentlemen of Georgetown. 

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[*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*](#)

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