



THEOLOGY of LAW

Wrestling with the god(s) in *Discworld*

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Sir Terry Pratchett (1948-2015), long time resident of Broad Chalke, Wiltshire, sold more than 100 million books in his lifetime. He was Britain's best-selling author in the 1990s, best known for his 41 comic fantasy novels set on the *Discworld* and, for co-writing the book *Good Omens* with Neil Gaiman.

Since his death from complications caused by the early-onset Alzheimer's disease from which he had suffered for the last 8 years of his life, the popularity of his novels has continued, even though the Discworld Emporium in Wincanton has become, since the pandemic, an online only store.

Sir Terry Pratchett: The Myth

There is a temptation to look at the dearly departed through rose-tinted spectacles. Introducing a volume of Pratchett's early essays, his good friend Neil Gaiman wrote:

“Terry is, in the popular mind, as far as I can tell, a beaming, gentle, wise soul of twinkling eye and noble mien, a sensible old comforter, able to be enlisted by people of widely differing beliefs into their camps because of course their Terry would have agreed with them ... [T]his semi-mythical Terry ... is merrier than the Terry I remember, significantly less irascible, much less likely to hold opinions you disagree with (whoever you are reading this, whatever it is you believe, I promise that the real Terry held at least one opinion that would have made you curl your toes and go ‘Oh, come on, you don't really think that!); he is levelheaded and always lovable. The real Terry

Pratchett was certainly lovable, but not always. He had, as he would have been the first to tell you, his days.”¹

I want to try to avoid that trap this evening. Much as I have enjoyed, admired, and learnt from the work of Pratchett over the years, I want to avoid treating him as “one of us Christians”. He was, after all, named Humanist of the Year by the British Humanist Association in 2013. I want to take his views on religion, expressed in his *Discworld* novels and in the occasional piece of short prose he wrote, at face value, to see what we can learn from them and how they might help us in our own wrestling with God.

Guilty of Literature

I recently listened to Sir Karl Jenkins, composer of *Adiemus* and *The Armed Man* describing how snobby the “proper” classical composers were about his jazz-inspired, popular, melodious pieces of music. In the same way, Sir Terry Pratchett’s writings were not taken seriously by the literary classes. Because they were set in a fantasy world, they were written off as frivolous entertainment and escapism. However, as Edward James argues in his article in the collection of essays *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*, ‘Readers of Pratchett, in all their millions, have, whether they realise it or not, been given some serious lessons in politics, civics and ethics.’² Sir Terry Pratchett’s writings are a great example of what George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Isaac Asimov and Ursula le Guin had already shown us: how fantasy or science fiction can open up angles and ways of thinking about fundamental questions from a different angle.

Where popular prejudices and temporary intellectual fashions can shut down our approaches to real world dilemmas, fantasy writing can open it up. To pick just one recurrent theme in Pratchett’s writings, how should we feel about the immigrant, the Other? What about those Deep Down Dwarfs who have moved into our city but who retain their old prejudices and customs from the mines? Should we include the Orc or be afraid of him?³ Should we treat the goblins as equals or as scum?⁴

¹ Neil Gaiman, ‘Foreword’ to Terry Pratchett, *A Stroke of the Pen: The Lost Stories* (London: Doubleday, 2023), xi.

² Edward James ‘The City Watch’ in A.M. Butler, E. James and F. Mendlesohn (eds.) *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (Reading: Science Fiction Foundation, 2001), 128.

³ *Unseen Academicals* Discworld 37 (London: Corgi, 2014).

⁴ *Snuff* Discworld 39 (London: Corgi, 2011).

Dunmanifestin

The *Discworld* is not a monotheistic universe. It is fought over by squabbling gods, who reside in the holy mountain of Cori Celesti. In *Small Gods* (Discworld 13), the power of each of these gods waxes and wanes, depending on how many people believe in them and how strongly they believe. *Small Gods* is set in Omnia, a theocratic state whose religion teaches that Om is the only true God. Omnians are monotheistic, presented by Terry Pratchett as the Discworld's equivalent of a combination of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Puritans, as the name of Visit-The-Infidel-With-Explanatory-Pamphlets (who becomes Constable Visit, a member of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch) indicates.

The entire plot of *Small Gods* is built around the idea that, despite the carapace of the state religion, true faith in Om has dwindled almost to nothing, and Brother Brutha is the only true believer in Om left.

What bothers Pratchett about the Omnians is their rigid certainty that they are right, and that everyone else is wrong, and the crusading mentality this promotes when rigid certainty is combined with power and a capacity for violence. Pratchett believes that goodness is to be found everywhere, in all kinds of people not just those in our own tribe. He also believes that life is more messy than any set of dogmas can or ought to control. It is not just the rigidity of the Omnians he objects to, an even bigger enemy in his novels are the malevolent Auditors, rationalist non-entities who seek to destroy freedom and life in the name of order.

How might we reflect on this? First, I think that Pratchett is right to draw to our attention our ability to give things credence by our beliefs. After all, money only has value because we think it does, and law only works because, most of the time, we think we ought to obey it. We live in a world which is, at least in part, "make-believe".

Second, in Pratchett's very first *Discworld* novel, *The Colour of Magic*, the tourist Twoflower meets the goddess, the Lady (the anthropomorphic personification of Lady Luck). Twoflower, who comes from the Agatean Empire says to her:

"We don't have gods where I come from," said Twoflower.

'You do, you know,' said the Lady. 'Everyone has gods. You just don't think they're gods.'"⁵

As David Foster Wallace said in his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, "Everybody Worships".⁶ Human beings are created to worship. We worship money, we worship security, we worship sex, we worship power, we worship the blissful numbness that drugs or

⁵ *The Colour of Magic* Discworld 1 (London: Corgi, 1983), 260.

⁶ <https://mbird.com/literature/more-david-foster-wallace-quotes/>

alcohol appear to promise. We create all sorts of idols. How do we learn to recognise idols, to name our gods? Idols are things that we end up sacrificing everything else of value in order to pursue.

Third, we should be aware of the constant human tendency to create gods in our own image. That is not just true of the idols we worship, it is also true for Jews, Muslims and Christians who claim to worship the one true God. Pratchett knew that our ideas of God are too small. I've been married for nearly 30 years but my wife still has the capacity to surprise me. Does God ever surprise you? If not, if you can get your head round God, then your idea of God is too small. Part of the discipline of reading, and re-reading Scripture, and reading writers who are coming from different perspectives, even or especially when it makes us feel uncomfortable, is to challenge us to let God out of the box into which our minds are constantly attempting to put God.

Fourth, however, there is a tendency in our age to accept Pratchett's implicit claim that monotheism is bad and that polytheism is, or was in our world, more tolerant and treated people with more dignity. That claim is, as David Bentley Hart in *Atheist Delusions* and Tom Holland in *Dominion* have both shown, bunk. A polytheistic world is a world in which the realm of the divine is a realm of violence and chaos. A monotheistic world is a world in which God is on the throne, and ultimate peace and order is to be hoped for. As the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires showed, a polytheistic worldview either assumes that the relations between human beings and cultures will be inherently violent or endorses an all-powerful human ruler who will impose peace through their will.

Objective morality

In the *Discworld*, the gods (with a small 'g') are not the ultimate reality. They are manifestations of belief. The gods do not govern the universe. Does that mean that Pratchett's universe is chaotic and without a moral compass? To the contrary, a defiant belief in objective truth, justice, and goodness runs like a stick of rock through Pratchett's work.

Astute reviewers of Pratchett's books have spotted that while Pratchett's style is redolent of P.G. Wodehouse's wit set in Tolkien's world, underneath the punning there is allegory and satire as powerful as that of Jonathan Swift, the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and the author of *Gulliver's Travels* and the satirical *A Modest Proposal*. *The Guardian* commented about *Going Postal* (Discworld 33), "With all the puns, strange names and quick-fire jokes ... it's easy to miss how cross about injustice Terry Pratchett can be. This darkness and concrete morality sets his work apart from imitators of his English Absurd school of comic

fantasy.” Neil Gaiman was similarly adamant, writing in *The Guardian* on 24 September 2014: “Terry Pratchett isn’t jolly. He’s angry.”

Pratchett’s anger at injustice is presented to us principally through two characters: Samuel Vimes and Granny Weatherwax. Commander Sam Vimes is instantly recognisable. He is a knight errant, a hard-drinking, bent out of shape, detective in a dysfunctional film noir city. He is deliberately modelled on Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe or Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry. Granny Weatherwax is a no nonsense witch, who achieves results through “headology”. Let’s look at Sam Vimes first.

Objective Justice and the Rule of Law

Pratchett’s view about the importance of law and justice emerges most clearly in *Night Watch* (Discworld 29), which is, in my view, his greatest novel. In *Night Watch*, Pratchett identifies the claim to be governing for the good of the community as intrinsic to the claim by rulers to be governing according to law.⁷ This claim is traced back to the very oath which the Watch officers swear when they are enrolled:

“I comma square bracket recruit’s name square bracket comma do solemnly swear by square bracket recruit’s deity of choice square bracket to uphold the Laws and Ordinances of the city of Ankh-Morpork comma serve the public trust comma and defend the subjects of His stroke Her bracket delete whichever is inappropriate bracket Majesty bracket name of reigning monarch bracket without fear comma favour comma or thought of personal safety semi-colon to pursue evildoers and protect the innocent comma laying down my life if necessary in the cause of said duty ...”⁸

As Vimes explains his reading of the oath to his men:⁹

“You took an oath to uphold the law and defend the citizens without fear or favour,” said Vimes. “And to protect the innocent. That’s all they put in. Maybe they thought

⁷ Whilst such a claim is not strictly logically necessary, the rule of law is invariably presented as serving the interests of the community, or at least of that part of the community which matters.

⁸ *Night Watch* Discworld 29 (London: Doubleday, 2002) 87.

⁹ At this stage they are all men. The entry of women into the Watch comes later, that is to say, earlier, in the sequence of books.

those were the important things. Nothing in there about orders, even from me. You're an officer of the law, not a soldier of the government.”¹⁰

Throughout all of the novels in which he features as a character, Vimes never forgets that he is not a politician's puppet but instead an officer of the law. Whereas the police officers in Klatch and in Uberwald are ‘enforcers for the city rulers’,¹¹ right from the beginning in *Guards! Guards!*, Ankh-Morpork's Watch are, under Vimes's command, officers of the law.¹² Vimes clearly relates law to a series of moral goods: the defence of citizens, the pursuit of evildoers, and the protection of the innocent.

Pratchett is furious about any form of privilege, whether that of private interest or of wealth. In *Men At Arms*, Vimes challenges the culture of the Guilds which has developed, and overcomes the claim that ‘*Guild law prevails inside Guild walls*’.¹³ In *Night Watch*, Pratchett travels back in time to a point when secret policemen terrorised Ankh-Morpork's population. He then has the following exchange with a “seamstress”¹⁴ named Rosie.

“They're a law unto themselves, over in Ankh. Some rough man walking around with no tradesman's tools ... well, he's to be turned off the patch, and if they rob you blind while they're doing it who's going to care?”

Yes, thought Vimes. That's the way it was. Privilege, which just means private law. Two types of people laugh at the law: those that break it and those that make it. Well, it's not like that now- ...”

Natural Law

In Christian thought, the idea of objective morality, the idea that the same rules should apply to everyone, cashes out in two ways. One way is in the Ten Commandments. The other way is through the natural law, which is understood as the universal sense of morality about we should

¹⁰ *Night Watch*, 238.

¹¹ *Jingo* Discworld 21 (London: Corgi, 1998), 345; *The Fifth Elephant* Discworld 24 (London: Corgi, 1999), 218.

¹² In *Guards! Guards!* Discworld 8 (London: Corgi, 1990) at 247, when the Patrician's lunatic secretary has first sacked Vimes and then offered him his job back, Vimes asserts: “You can't give me my job back. It was never yours to take away. I was never an officer of the city, or an officer of the king, or an officer of the Patrician. I was an officer of the law.”

¹³ *Men At Arms* Discworld 15 (London: Corgi, 1994), 43.

¹⁴ Seamstress is a euphemism for prostitute in Ankh-Morpork.

treat one another. Natural law was understood by Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages and the early modern period as being the law which applied regardless of what the ruler said.

Pratchett explores the difference natural law makes in practice in *Snuff* (Discworld 39). The story takes place in the Shires, a district outside Ankh-Morpork near the family home of Vimes's wife Lady Sybil Ramkin. The law of Ankh-Morpork does not apply there and what law there is, is made by the local landowners. The local landowners regard the goblins as vermin and treat them as slaves. Vimes disagrees. He persuades the local police officer, Feeney Upshot who announces to a crowd:

“‘Commander Vimes would like you to know, and so indeed would I, that the law applies to everybody, and that means it applies to goblins as well.’

There was a certain amount of nodding at that and Feeney continued, ‘But if the law applies to goblins then goblins have rights and if goblins have rights then it would be right to have a goblin policeman attached to the Shire force.’”¹⁵

Returning to Ankh-Morpork, Vimes explains to the ruler of the City, the Patrician, Lord Vetinari, what he has done and why.

“‘Yes. The scandal has already taken place, sir, more than once,’ said Vimes coldly. ‘He trafficked in living, breathing and thinking people. Many of them died!’ ... ‘They [referring to the goblins] are living creatures who can talk and think and have songs and names, and he treated them like some kind of disposable tools.’”

Lord Vetinari replies:

“‘Indeed, Vimes, but as I have indicated, goblins have always been considered a kind of vermin. However, Ankh-Morpork, the kingdom of the Low King and also that of the Diamond King, Uberwald, Lancre and all the independent cities of the plain are passing a law to the effect that goblins will henceforth be considered as sapient beings, equal to, if not the same as, trolls and dwarfs and humans and werewolves, et cetera et cetera, answerable to what we have agreed to call ‘the common law’ and also protected by it. That means killing one would be a capital crime.’”¹⁶

¹⁵ *Snuff* Discworld 39 (London: Doubleday, 2011), 251-52.

¹⁶ *Snuff*, 370-71.

The parallels with the slave trade, extermination camps, colour bars, and Jim Crow laws in our own world should be obvious.

Granny Weatherwax on the Nature of Sin

Let's look now at Granny Weatherwax. Some of Pratchett's most profound theological statements are to be found in the mouths of the witches. On *Discworld*, the witches are mistresses of common sense and psychology as much as magic. There is no hint of the occult fascination of Philip Pullman. The witches reside in the hill country of Lancre. They have little or nothing to do with the wizards of the Unseen University, who are the mad scientists of the *Discworld*, not the powerful wise men of Middle-Earth.

In *Carpe Jugulum* (Discworld 23), Granny Weatherwax has a theological discussion about the nature of sin with Brother Mightily Oats, an Omnian missionary trying to win converts in Lancre. She says to him:

“And sin, young man, is when you treat people as things. Including yourself. That's what sin is.’

‘It's a lot more complicated than that –‘

‘No. It ain't. When people say things are a lot more complicated than that, they means they're getting worried that they won't like the truth. People as things, that's where it starts.’

‘Oh, I'm sure there are worse crimes –‘

‘But they *starts* with thinking about people as things ...’¹⁷

I think that is brilliant and profound. To treat others as things to fail to love them as we ought. To treat ourselves as just a thing, some “messed up piece of arse” (to slightly sanitise one of George Michael's lyrics) is to fail to understand our own worth in God's eyes.

Pratchett has, therefore, a firm belief in the worth and dignity of people, in the importance of the rule of law, and in objective right and wrong. He told the *Times* in 2008: "I believe in the same God that [Einstein](#) did ... And it is just possible that once you have got past all the gods that we have created with big beards and many human traits, just beyond all that on the other

¹⁷ *Carpe Jugulum* Discworld 23 (London: Doubleday, 1998), 210-11.

side of physics, there just may be the ordered structure from which everything flows."¹⁸ He attempts, however, to hold on to these key ideas without grounding them in belief in God (with a capital "G"). Why?

The value of freedom

But, although Pratchett is angry about injustice, he does not think that law is the answer to all of humanity's problems. In *Night Watch*, Vimes reflects on the proper scope of the police officer's role. "You weren't some walking god, dispensing finely tuned natural justice. Your job was simply to bring back peace."¹⁹ In *Men At Arms*, we learn that Vimes's second in command, Carrot is the rightful king of Ankh-Morpork.²⁰ Knowing who he is, and aware of his charismatic nature, Carrot chooses not to seek the throne but rather to serve as a police officer. At the end of that book, when Vimes picks up the gonne, a dangerous weapon, he experiences the temptation to wield it to purge the world of evil.²¹ With the help of Carrot, he resists the temptation, however, for it is down that path that lie the gulags and the concentration camps.

The job of the watchman is not to right all the wrongs in the world. It is the more limited task of ensuring that people are able to live with a degree of security and with a degree of freedom.²² As Dorfl, the golem who is sworn in as a constable at the end of *Feet of Clay* (Discworld 19) puts it (speaking with each word capitalised as is the habit of golems): "What Better Work For One Who Loves Freedom Than The Job Of Watchman. Law Is The Servant Of Freedom. Freedom Without Limits Is Just A Word".²³

Pratchett shares with orthodox Christian teaching a scepticism about human perfectibility, a wariness of utopias, and a commitment to freedom and to placing limits on power. Despite this affinities with Christian thought, Pratchett was insistent that he had never 'found God'.

¹⁸ 'Terry Pratchett, Lord of Discworld, fights to save his powers', *Times Online*, June 2008.

¹⁹ *Night Watch*, 235.

²⁰ *Men At Arms*, 272-74.

²¹ *Men At Arms*, 268-71.

²² There is, of course, more than one way of assessing Pratchett's message about the proper role of the police force. In a review of *Night Watch*, John Newsinger argues that the book has an anti-utopian message, about the importance of maintaining social order *above all else*, which marks an increasingly reactionary streak in Pratchett's work: 'The People's Republic of Treacle Mine Road Betrayed: Terry Pratchett's *Night Watch*' *Vector* 232 (Nov/Dec 2003) 15-16. Pratchett's rejection of utopia seems to have two roots. One is a cynicism about human nature, identified by Mendlesohn 'Faith and Ethics' in A.M. Butler, E. James and F. Mendlesohn (eds.) *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* (Reading: Science Fiction Foundation, 2001) 160, and the other is a more specific wariness about 'authority figures and the corrupting influence of power': see Sue Thomason's review of *Monstrous Regiment* at p.29 in the same volume of *Vector*.

²³ *Feet of Clay* Discworld 19 (London: Corgi, 1997), 281.

The power of myth: rising ape, falling angel, (or both?)

Everyone has a worldview, a basic picture of the way the world is, which shapes what we focus our attention to, how we see the world, and how we interpret events. Our worldviews are shaped by our psychology, by our history and by other factors. They are the myths, the stories, the narratives, which capture our imaginations. In a short piece called ‘The God Moment’, published in *The Mail on Sunday* in 2008 in response to the rumours that he had found God, Pratchett reflects on the myth which caught his imagination and why he was drawn to it rather than to the Christian alternative.

“Evolution was far more thrilling to me than the biblical account. Who would not rather be a rising ape than a falling angel? To my juvenile eyes Darwin was proved true every day. It doesn’t take much to make us flip back into monkeys again.

The New Testament, now, I quite liked. Jesus had a lot of good things to say ...

But I could never see the two testaments as one coherent narrative. Besides, by then I was reading mythology for fun, and had run into Sir George Frazer’s *Folklore in the Old Testament*, a velvet-gloved hatchet job if ever there was one. By the time I was fourteen I was too smart for my own god.

I could never find the answers, you see. Perhaps I asked the wrong kind of question, or was the wrong kind of kid, even back in primary school.”²⁴

Later in that piece, he comments wistfully: “I wonder what my life might have been like if I’d met a decent theologian when I was nine.”²⁵

I would have loved to talk to the young Terry Pratchett. Like him, I read mythology for fun as a teenager, but I was drawn to C.S. Lewis’s conviction that Christianity was the myth that came true. I think my adult self would have been able to make a decent attempt at explaining to him how the Old and New Testaments do form one consistent narrative, a true story about God who was even angrier about injustice than Pratchett is, and who decided to do something about it by sending first prophets and then his own Son in order to rescue us from our sin and injustice, and to show us and equip us to live lives in which we treat other people as equals, with dignity, and with respect.

²⁴ Terry Pratchett, *A Slip of the Keyboard* (New York: Anchor, 2014), 260.

²⁵ Pratchett, *A Slip of the Keyboard*, 261.

Protest atheism

I think, however, that Pratchett's doubt about God runs deeper than an inability to connect the Jesus of the New Testament with the God of the Old Testament. As I read him, Sir Terry Pratchett was a 'protest atheist'. Protest atheists are often serious thinkers, who reject God, or the Christian view of God, because they believe God to be immoral.

We hear Pratchett's protest atheism in a story Lord Vetinari, the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, tells in *Unseen Academicals* (Discworld 37):

“when I was a young boy on holiday in Uberwald I was walking along the bank of a stream when I saw a mother otter with her cubs. A very endearing sight, I'm sure you will agree, and even as I watched, the mother otter dived into the water and came up with a plump salmon, which she subdued and dragged on to a half-submerged log. As she ate it, while of course it was still alive, the body split and I remember to this day the sweet pinkness of its roes as they spilled out, much to the delight of the baby otters who scrambled over themselves to feed on the delicacy. One of nature's wonders, gentlemen: mother and children dining upon mother and children. And that's when I first learned about evil. It is built into the very nature of the universe. Every world spins in pain. **If there is any kind of supreme being, I told myself, it is up to all of us to become his moral superior.**”²⁶

One response to Lord Vetinari's story would be to claim that because the world that we live in today is not God's perfect creation but is fallen, and that is the reason that nature is red in tooth and claw. I do not think Pratchett would find that a convincing response. It assumes the truth of Christian story rather than proving it.

A second response would be to claim that there is nothing untoward about the otter feeding on the salmon because there is a natural hierarchy of organisms, in which humans are higher than other mammals, mammals higher than fish, and so on. I do not think Pratchett would find such an account persuasive either, and there are reasons to be concerned about the idea of hierarchy in an era in which we are becoming ever more dependent on the balance and interdependence of all nature including ourselves.

A third possibility is that the idea of an evil god is unthinkable. This is where René Descartes ended up. Descartes decided to doubt everything. The only thing he found he could not doubt

²⁶ *Unseen Academicals*, hardback, 229, emphasis added.

was his own existence: “I think therefore I am”. He then had to decide how to relate to the outside world: either everything was the creation of an evil god and nothing could be trusted, or everything was the creation of a good god and therefore we have *prima facie* reasons to trust our senses.”

C.S. Lewis picked up this theme in a lecture, ‘De Futilitate’,²⁷ given at Magdalen College, Oxford, around the end of World War II. He was speaking to an audience of students whose fathers had fought in the war to end all wars, and who had found themselves called upon to perform the same dreadful duty. He was speaking to an audience confronted with the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps and on the verge of the potential for destruction of the nuclear age.

Lewis argues that this is not the best of all possible worlds. If we take off our rose-tinted glasses, we cannot help but see its brokenness and ugliness. Yet he finds in our very capacity to recognise that something is profoundly wrong with the world, reason to hope.

“If a Brute and Blackguard made the world, then he also made our minds. If he made our minds, he also made that very standard in them whereby we judge him to a Brute and Blackguard. And how can we trust a standard which comes from such a brutal and blackguardly source? If we reject him, we ought also to reject all his works. But one of his works is this very moral standard by which we reject him. [66] If we accept this standard then we are really implying that he is not a Brute and Blackguard. If we reject it, then we have thrown away the only instrument by which we can condemn him. Heroic anti-theism thus has a contradiction at its centre. You must trust the universe in one respect even in order to condemn it in every other.”

Lewis thinks that there is something noble about the protest atheism of Pratchett and others who are furious at the evils God has allowed to occur and which have been perpetrated in God’s name. Lewis goes on to say:

“I cannot and never could persuade myself that such defiance is displeasing to the supreme mind. There is something holier about the atheism of a Shelley than about the theism of a Paley. ... The point [of the Book of Job] is that the man who accepts our ordinary standard of good and by it hotly criticizes divine justice receives the divine

²⁷ *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 66-67.

approval ... Apparently the way to advance from our imperfect apprehension of justice to the absolute justice is *not* to throw our imperfect apprehensions aside but boldly to go on applying them.”²⁸

The two figures C.S. Lewis is referring to are Percy Shelley, romantic poet whose wife Mary wrote *Frankenstein*, and William Paley. One of Shelley’s most famous poems, *Ozymandias*, is about how even the greatest reputations and empires fade. It contains the line: "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" William Paley was a Christian apologist, who came up the analogy of God as a divine watchmaker and who argued that nature points uncontrovertibly to God. For Lewis, Paley’s glib justifications sound hollow, but Shelley’s protests against injustice ring true.

Lewis’s response to protest atheism is similar to the one offered by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Neither great writer seeks to explain away the ugliness and violence in the world. Lewis does not excuse God from accountability. Lewis’s response affirms our moral indignation but challenges us to trust, like Job, in the God who will one day, have the last word. We can have confidence that the God who is the source of our righteous indignation about injustice is even more committed than we can possibly imagine to dealing with it. But whereas we would want Jesus to build on the crowd’s acclamation on Palm Sunday to seize political power, he instead suffers the worst the world can throw at him enduring the agonies of the cross in order to release the hopeful, healing power of the resurrection. As Rebekah Valerius puts it in her commentary on Lewis’s argument: “As difficult to imagine as it is now, our universe is moving towards a final picture in which this ultimate Source of reason and goodness has promised to wipe away every tear that has ever been shed in the face of futility. It is to that end that my hopes cling.”²⁹

Memento Mori

All of which brings us to my final topic, and one of the Pratchett’s most beloved characters, DEATH. If the Victorian age was obsessed with Death and could not talk about Sex, in our own time we have the opposite problem. DEATH in Discworld is an anthropomorphic personification who adopts a child, stands in for the Hogfather (the Discworld’s Father Christmas), enjoys a curry, and carries out his duties without fear or favour.

²⁸ *Christian Reflections*, 70.

²⁹ https://worldviewbulletin.substack.com/p/c-s-lewis-on-futility-and-the-argument#_ftn13

The Discworld's DEATH is kindly death, the natural death we all long for, dying peacefully in our sleep at the end of a life well-lived full of days. Pratchett challenges our generation to live our lives in the face of death, to learn not to fear death but to accept it, and to think about what it would mean to die well. As Christians we look forward to what Esau McCaulley calls the 'terrifying comfort' of the Last Judgment, and beyond that to eternal life, in a kingdom in which justice will rule (2 Peter 3:13).

Redemption

I want to finish with what I think is Pratchett's best reflection on death, from *Small Gods*. I mentioned Fyodor Dostoyevsky when thinking about Christian responses to protest atheism. Dostoyevsky explored questions of theodicy (the justification of God's actions) in *Brothers Karamazov* in which he examines how Jesus would have been rejected by the religious authorities in a scene in which Jesus is confronted by the Grand Inquisitor.

In *Small Gods*, other than the Great God Om himself, the main characters are Brutha, who is obviously meant to be Jesus, and the Grand Quisitor Deacon Vorbis, whose title gives away that he is the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoyevsky's novel. At the end of the book, Brutha dies:

"Brutha's body toppled forward almost gracefully, smacking into the table. The bowl overturned, and gruel dripped down on to the floor.

And then Brutha stood up, without a second glance at his corpse.

'Hah. I wasn't expecting you,' he said.

Death stopped leaning against the wall.

HOW FORTUNATE YOU WERE.

'But there's still such a lot to be done ...'

YES. THERE ALWAYS IS.

Brutha followed the gaunt figure through the wall where, instead of the privy that occupied the far side in normal space, there ...

... black sand.

The light was brilliant, crystalline, in a black sky filled with stars.

'Ah. There really *is* a desert. Does everyone get this?' said Brutha.

WHO KNOWS?

'And what is at the end of the desert?'

JUDGEMENT.

Brutha considered this.

‘Which end?’

Death grinned and stepped aside.

What Brutha had thought was a rock in the sand was a hunched figure, sitting clutching its knees. It looked paralysed with fear.

He stared.

‘Vorbis?’ he said.

He looked at Death.

‘But Vorbis died a hundred years ago!’

YES. HE HAD TO WALK IT ALL ALONE. ALL ALONE WITH HIMSELF. IF HE DARED.

‘He’s been here for a hundred years?’

POSSIBLY NOT. TIME IS DIFFERENT HERE. IT IS ... MORE PERSONAL.

‘Ah. You mean a hundred years can pass like a few seconds?’

A HUNDRED YEARS CAN PASS LIKE INFINITY.

The black-on-black eyes stared imploringly at Brutha, who reached out automatically, without thinking ... and then hesitated.

HE WAS A MURDERER, said Death. AND A CREATOR OF MURDERERS. A TORTURER. WITHOUT PASSION. CRUEL. CALLOUS. COMPASSIONLESS.

‘Yes. I know. He’s Vorbis,’ said Brutha. Vorbis changed people. Sometimes he changed them into dead people. But he always changed them. That was his triumph.

He sighed.

‘But I’m me,’ he said.

Vorbis stood up, uncertainly, and followed Brutha across the desert.

Death watched them walk away.

THE END.³⁰

³⁰ *Small Gods* Discworld 13 (London: Corgi, 1993), 379-81.