

For the Benefit of Aspiring Gods

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As far as we can determine, gods have been intervening in our lives—or not—for somewhere between 6,000 and 4.5-ish billion years. Their methods vary as much as their timelines. Ancient Greek and Roman gods are petty, duplicitous, and warlike. So, for that matter, is the god found in the Bible and the Qur'an. The deist god is an absentee parent. Nature-as-god is indiscriminately cruel, and surely the universe enjoys a good belly laugh every time someone cracks open a copy of *The Secret*.

Regardless of which god may or may not appeal, certainly we can agree that the better a god's performance, the better humankind fares. Accordingly, ethicists have been hard at work on a highly classified report called "Aspiring Gods' Goals & Guidelines for Happiness, Humanity, and Harmony!" or AGGGHHH! for short. Based on millennia of observing and evaluating various deities' methods and results, the soon-to-be-released volume promises to be the definitive guide for new gods, which pop up all the time, and for revised gods, which result each time an apologist opens the old yap. It's the perfect gift for the god in your life who prefers to get things right from the outset as opposed to drowning everyone the first time things go awry.

Notwithstanding AGGGHHH!'s top-secret status, your intrepid columnist managed to obtain an early draft. For the benefit of aspiring deities—pardon the boast, but I happen to know that many of them read this column—here is a sneak peek at some of AGGGHHH!'s forthcoming recommendations.



AGGGHHH! Tip 1: If you intend to use scripture, take a writing class. There is a market for gods who spell out doctrine clearly and in one place. People shouldn't have to weave together disparate verses scattered over a thousand-plus pages to understand your take on a given issue. Prune the contradictions, anachronisms, and absurdities. Try for accessible rather than impenetrable prose. Omit the stuff no one needs to know, such as who begat whom and the dimensions of portable tabernacles. Also, this is the twenty-first century, so you can dispense with the thees, thous, thiseths, and thateths.

AGGGHHH! Tip 2: Take a science class, too. Earth to gods: our planet doesn't have corners, bats aren't birds, and mustard seeds aren't the smallest. Talking asses exist, but not the four-legged kind. The Earth, not the sun, would have stood still at Joshua's command, but that would have flung everything, including Joshua and his army,

eastward at hundreds of miles per hour.

AGGGHHH! Tip 3: Don't confound languages. Someday you're going to let people launch spacecraft, so you might as well let them have their silly tower. A multiplicity of languages leads only to prejudice and strife, not to mention endless arguments about what you really meant in "the original text."

AGGGHHH! Tip 4: Provenance is everything. Speaking of original texts: there aren't any. What's up with that? Worshipers shouldn't have to make do with questionable copies of questionable copies, much less inevitable mistranslations, errors, and interpolations. With no originals and no clear chains of custody, it's impossible to establish authenticity.

AGGGHHH! Tip 5: Now and then, a little evidence would be helpful. Just once, the devout would love a chance to thrust rock-solid evidence under a smarty-pants skeptic's nose and say, "So there!" Surely something more

reliable than inner stirrings is not too much to ask of a deity that expects reverence, obedience, and cash.

AGGGHHH! Tip 6: Don't make your followers kill. If you're serious about the whole "Thou shalt not kill" thing, you might try urging Israel to befriend the Midianites, telling Muslims to embrace infidels, letting sabbath violators off with a stern talking-to, suggesting that competing Buddhists not annihilate one another, and not slaughtering Egyptian children.

AGGGHHH! Tip 7: Try making useful prophecies. Granted, vagueness allows for questioning the interpretation instead of the prophecy. Still, if you'd spell things out a little better, people could quit freaking out about vaccine-transmitted chips, and Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses could quit pretending that the Second Coming happened when they weren't looking.

AGGGHHH! Tip 8: Be fair. Do you know who else punishes an enemy's

descendants unto the fourth generation? Mobsters, that's who! For all we know, they got the idea from the god of Abraham.

AGGGHHH! Tip 9: Tone it down. Urging humanity to humility is a good idea, but you'll rather undo yourself if you demand money, sacrifices, pagantry, groveling, expensive houses of worship, and, for that matter, worship.

AGGGHHH! Tip 10: Don't overlook the little things. Ban carnitas if you must. But if you're not too busy, perhaps you could also speak up in opposition to rape, child abuse, sexism, racism, slavery, family violence, genocide, Fox News, OAN, and Marshmallow Peeps.

AGGGHHH! Tip 11: Here's your chance to settle disputes. The world wants to know! Does withholding help from people really help them more than helping them would help them? If you're a fan of the prosperity gospel, fine, but you might want to create

smaller camels and bigger needles. Do you or do you not want everyone to own guns? Is wokeness really self-sabotaging and dangerous, or is it just that some would rather present extremists as representative than admit to privilege and lack of empathy?

AGGGHHH! Tip 12: Put women in charge. They could do no worse and might just do better.

AGGGHHH! Tip 13: If you must leave men in charge, at least let men get pregnant. It would be fun to see how fast they'd enshrine reproductive rights. **■**

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