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Gore Vidal and the Sky God

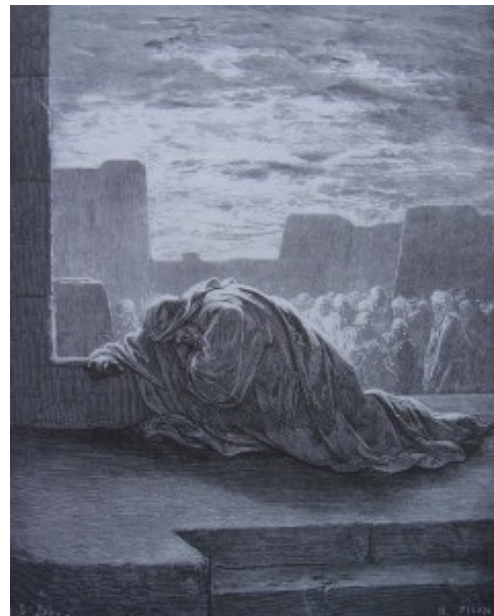


Monday, August 6, 2012

The death of author and controversialist Gore Vidal last week brought an end to one of America's most gifted and flamboyantly offensive literary voices. Eugene Luther Gore Vidal was born in 1925 on the campus of the United States Military Academy at West Point. For decades, Vidal was one of America's most outrageous men of letters. His life was marked by a long series of confrontations and he died as one of the nation's most famous and infamous literary figures.

Like many in his literary generation, Vidal was born to privilege, but suffered from an unhappy childhood. His father, an aviation pioneer, was the head of civilian aviation in the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and later became a founder of TWA. His mother was a deeply troubled socialite who was the daughter of U.S. Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma. Most of Vidal's childhood was spent in the Gore home in Washington, D.C. Vidal's mother later married Hugh D. Auchincloss, stepfather to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and the young Vidal lived for some time on the Auchincloss estate in northern Virginia. He attended prominent private schools including St. Albans School in Washington and Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, from which he graduated.

At St. Albans, Vidal dropped his first two names and identified himself simply as Gore Vidal, believing even then that it would be a better name for a literary personality. At the same school, Vidal developed a romance with another boy, Jimmie Trimble, who was killed



in the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II.

As Charles McGrath of *The New York Times* reported, Vidal claimed to have had over 1,000 sexual encounters with both men and women before the age of 25. Though he described his own preference for “same-sex sex,” Vidal denied the existence of both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Literary critic Michael Dirda of *The Washington Post* explained, “Again and again he insisted that everyone is really bisexual: ‘There is no such thing as a homosexual or heterosexual person. There are only homosexual or heterosexual acts. Most people are a mixture of impulses if not practices.’”

Upon his death, he was described by *The Wall Street Journal* as “a slashing literary provocateur and by *The New York Times* as both “an Augustan figure” and an “elegant, acerbic, all-around man of letters.” He was known for his outrageous public appearances and his leftist political views. In one famous encounter, Vidal opposed conservative publisher and author William F. Buckley, Jr. in a face-off during televised coverage of the riotous 1968 Democratic National Convention. The two exchanged insults in an infamous outburst and nearly came to physical blows before a live national audience. Nothing quite like it has happened in the mainstream media ever since.

Gore Vidal ran for elective office twice, losing a race for Congress from New York and a race for a Senate seat from California. He described himself as a populist but did not seem to like people. He once said, “I’m exactly as I appear. There is no warm, lovable person inside. Beneath my cold exterior, once you break the ice, you find cold water.”

His literary talents were prodigious, though he scandalized the elites early in his career by writing a novel openly celebrating homosexuality. That 1948 novel, *The City and the Pillar*, was dedicated to Jimmie Trimble. Vidal found himself sidelined from the literary establishment with that novel, called pornographic by some reviewers, and he went to Hollywood, where he established both a reputation and a fortune as a screenwriter and dramatist. He rewrote the screenplay of *Ben-Hur* and was involved in a host of other projects for the movies and television.

He re-entered literary life with a series of novels. One of these, *Myra Breckenridge* (1968), was one of the first depictions of sex-reassignment surgery. He lived with a male companion for many years in Italy in what was described as a platonic relationship, later moving back to the United States.

Most of the media coverage after his death dealt extensively with his homosexuality and radical politics. He claimed, for example, that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew in advance of Pearl Harbor and that President George W. Bush knew in advance of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Many also mentioned his antipathy to Christianity.

But the true nature of Gore Vidal's theological protest was largely, if not totally, missing from the national coverage. In his 1992 Lowell Lecture at Harvard University, Vidal attacked not just Christianity, but the very notion of monotheism.

In his essay, "Monotheism and its Discontents," based on the lecture at Harvard, Vidal perceptively and blasphemously blamed the existence of a binding sexual morality on monotheism.

"The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism," Vidal asserted, "From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament three anti-human religions have evolved — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These are sky-god religions."

He went on to describe the "sky-god" as patriarchal and jealous. "He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not just for one tribe but for all creation."

He claimed that America's founders were "not enthusiasts of the sky-god," but that devotees have had an inordinate influence throughout most of the nation's history. "From the beginning, sky-godders have always exerted great pressure in our secular republic," he argued. "Also, evangelical Christian groups have traditionally drawn strength from the suppressed." He blamed the "sky-godders" for "their innumerable taboos on sex, alcohol, gambling."

In one scathing paragraph, he pressed his case:

"Although many of the Christian evangelists feel it necessary to convert everyone on earth to their primitive religion, they have been prevented — so far — from forcing others to worship as they do, but they *have* forced — most tyrannically and wickedly — their superstitions and hatred upon all of us through the civil law and through general prohibitions. So it is upon that account that I now favor an all-out war on the monotheists."

He was not reluctant to state his main concern:

"The ongoing psychopathic hatred of same-sexuality has made the United States the laughingstock of the civilized world. In most of the First World [Europe], monotheism is weak or nonexistent, private sexual behavior has nothing at all to do with those not involved, much less with the law."

Christians should pay close attention to Gore Vidal's argument, but the mainstream media have almost uniformly ignored it. The obituaries have celebrated his literary gifts and noted his radical political ideas and rejection of Christianity, but not his call for "all-out war on the monotheists."

We should realize that Vidal's rejection of monotheism, though blasphemous, was truly perceptive. He was certainly correct that a binding and objective morality requires a monotheistic God who both exists and reveals himself. He was also correct in pointing to the fact that a secularized Europe has largely abandoned a biblical morality when it comes, most specifically, to sexual behavior.

Gore Vidal was a controversialist, but in making this argument, he was simply saying aloud what many others in his social class and literary circles were thinking. He outlived most of his contemporaries and critics, but he lived a tragic life and he died a tragic death. Christians, sobered and saddened by the legacy of this "slashing literary provocateur" must not miss the troubling parable of Gore Vidal and the Sky God. It tells us a very great deal about the intellectual world Gore Vidal now leaves behind.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/

Michael Dirda, "[Gore Vidal Dies: Imperious Gadfly and Prolific, Graceful Writer Was 86](#)," *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, August 1, 2012.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/gore-vidal-dies-imperious-gadfly-and-prolific-graceful-writer-was-86/2012/08/01/gJQAFF7FOX_story.html

Charles McGrath, "[Gore Vidal, Prolific, Elegant, Acerbic Man of Letters, Dies at 86](#)," *The New York Times*, Thursday, August 2, 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/01/books/gore-vidal-elegant-writer-dies-at-86.html?pagewanted=all>

Gore Vidal, "Monotheism and its Discontents," in *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire* [Chicago: Odonian Press, 1986-1992), pages 73-88.

Artwork, "The Rejection of Esdras" by Gustave Dore.

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