

Minimal Theology  
By Chris Nagele

Serilt glanced up at his desk clock.

4:35.

Light streamed through the windows of the second floor office, though he had failed to note its dimming. He tilted his head in annoyance and turned back to the sheet of paper on the desk and the pen hovering above. He considered for a moment, then finished the line. With a sigh, he flipped through the papers. There were seven of them in total.

Gathering the pages into a single stack, he placed them carefully in a leather briefcase and set about preparing to leave. There was not much to do and soon enough he grabbed his bag and hurried out the door.

The physics building at the University of South Rest was long. Only four or five stories high in most places, the building stretched for the better part of a kilometer, with various underpasses and walkways allowing people to move from the south side of the university to the north without having to actually step foot in the dapple structure. Unfortunately, Serilt's office was not at all near the computing center, and he would have to travel quite a ways to drop off the batch of integrals.

He walked west on the second floor. The monotony of the hallway was broken occasionally by a classroom and even more occasionally by a bank of windows. He saw no one on the ten minute walk, an anomaly of itself.

Serilt reached the proper stairwell and skipped down the curved steps, worried that he was later than he had feared. After one flight, he exited to the right and walk-jogged into a thankfully open doorway.

'Sorry Prof.' The man behind the desk shifted his ample weight around his chair. He spoke in a gruff and confident voice.

'Come on Jemi, you're still open.'

'It's not that Prof, you're on time. We're just offline right now.'

Serilt blinked, 'offline?'

Jemi looked up, 'Yeah, I can't send anyone down to the computing room at the moment, didn't you hear?'

Serilt threw his head back and exhaled dramatically, 'seriously? What happened down there?'

Jemi shrugged, 'experimental mishap, the room below is flooded with vacuum and until they get that fixed, I'm not allowed to send anyone down.'

'Jemi you're killin me. What's the point of the experimentalists having those gigantic facilities buried in the mountains if they keep screwing things up here?'

'Hey, you're telling me man. I've had a few people a bit less polite than yourself through here today.'

'Yeah, well. Any idea when they'll clean up the mess?'

'Might be a while, I'm supposed to direct you to the math department. You know where that is?'

He nodded reluctant acceptance, 'thanks Jemi.'

Serilt was supposed to meet some friends at 5:30 at their usual bar, *Somewhat*, which was located in the city proper, west of the campus. The math department, on the other hand, was a good fifteen minutes walk back east. He could drop the integrals off tomorrow, but he wanted to be finished with the task.

Serilt set off at a gentle jog. By now he was used to the thin air of the South Rest plateau and the autumn chill streaming past was not unpleasant.

When he arrived at the appropriate office, he found a high desk manned by one of the computing mages, her occupation given away by flowing red robes. She looked up mildly, 'can I help you?'

'Yes, I'm Serilt san de Ricole from the physics department and they told me to come here to drop off some integrals.' As he stumbled his way through the sentence, his tone rose in trepidation.

'Yes, may I see them?'

He opened his bag and handed over the stack of papers. The mage flipped through them, studying each page for about ten seconds. Serilt stood still, unaccountably nervous.

When she finished, she laid the papers back on the desk and said, 'it says you want to use a DFH scheme for the integration.'

'Yes...'

'AP would be better.'

Serilt frowned, 'if it's a question of precision, then it doesn't need to be so precise-'

'DFH doesn't always converge with these complex valued integrals.'

'Really? We always use DFH...'

Serilt trailed off, affixed by a withering stare.

'I won't accept these unless you agree to AP. It'll only take an extra day, any rush?'

'Well no, but-'

The mage interrupted and turned to point at a door behind her. 'There's the computing room, no one is using the DFH machine now so you're free to operate it yourself or you can leave these with me and we will use an AP scheme.'

Serilt frowned, 'I'm sorry. I can't use the machine.'

The mage had gone back to her work, but now she looked up.

He elaborated, 'I can't use magic here.'

She considered that for a moment, '*here*, you mean you're not from Thile?'

He nodded.

Instant contrition appeared on the robed woman's face, 'I'm so sorry professor, I just assumed.' She studied him for a second. 'Sorry but your n'Thilian is amazing. How long have you lived here?'

Serilt half smiled, 'I studied for the n'Thilian civil service exam when I was young.'

'Ah, I see. But here you are.' The mage motioned with an arm almost completely enveloped in her robes.

'Indeed. In the end I found academia to be more to my taste, if not quite as sexy as government work.' *Had he really just said the word sexy?*

'I'm sure we're the better for it. Once again, I apologize, didn't mean any offense.' She scooped up the papers with the integrals. 'And I will put these in priority. You can come and get them in a couple days.'

'Thanks, I really appreciate it. By the way, do you have the time?'

The mage's eyes glazed briefly as she magically checked, '5:18.'

'Thanks.' Even though he was late, some part of him demanded the conversation be continued. 'Do you guys have a lot of extra work from the physics department?'

'Yes we do. It's the fifth time this year you know.'

'Right, well on behalf of my more blow-stuff-up-minded colleagues, sincerest apologies.'

The woman smiled at him, 'Well it does give us the opportunity to belittle physics professors, so there is that.'

'That sounds like quite the pastime. I should give it a go.'

'Good luck.'

'Thanks again.'

When he entered the second floor atrium of *Somewhat* at a quarter to six, he found that he was not the only one to have been waylaid. In fact, of their usual group of six scientific thaumatologists, only one, a slight, dark haired, n'Thilian engineer was present.

Serilt greeted her with a wave. Inevitably he received a scowl in return.

'What's going on Thesinx? Were you planning on drinking alone all night?'

Thesinx pointedly drew on a straw descending into a brilliantly emerald liquid, but when she spoke her tone was light, 'I'm celebrating.'

'What for?'

'Not having to spend time with you.'

'Excellent.' Serilt flagged down a waiter and ordered a beer.

Thesinx waited till the waiter had departed, 'so what was it?'

'The physics department is quite literally on the brink of collapse so I had to use the math computing center.'

'For what?'

'Just some phase space integrals. I have a new idea about solving the quasi lattice problem with inflatons and I want to see if it has legs.'

A waiter delivered the beer and Serilt sipped.

'Best of luck. At least then you'd be interacting with *something* that has legs.'

Serilt choked on his beer. When he had recovered, he retorted, 'it's good to know you have my back on this one, Thes.' After a moment, he continued, 'so where is everyone?'

'Yass and Reoto are at a last minute rehearsal for some sort of play they've been coerced into. As for the others, I don't know. No one ever tells me anything.' She took another pointed drag on the straw.

'It's cause we don't like you.'

She grinned, 'and here I thought it was just because none of you can use magic. But, the truth always wins out, and now I won't feel obligated to be nice to you any more.'

'Oh my god.' Serilt was seated opposite the door and he had an uninterrupted view of the large, dark haired man who had just entered.

'I was only kidding.'

'No it's-' he motioned for her to turn around, 'isn't that Yari san de Rhune?'

The engineer peered behind her briefly, 'who, the big chap?'

'Yeah.' Serilt watched as the man weaved his way through a couple of low tables, making generally for the bar.

Thesinx looked at him and shrugged.

'He's an s-ball legend. He plays inside forward for my planet.'

This piqued the woman's interest. She turned fully around in her chair, 'he has the body for it, certainly.'

'The body for what exactly?'

'Looks like he's going to buy a drink.'

'He's going to try.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look who's working...'

'Uh oh. He probably doesn't speak n'Thilian does he?'

'Athletes are not typically known for their skill with languages.'

The pair watched as the big man arrived at the bar and spoke confidently in what Serilt assumed to be Xresian, Serilt's native tongue. The tall woman at the bar winced and then looked directly over at Serilt and Thesinx, a plea for assistance written plainly.

'That's our cue.'

'Seems so.'

They stood and made their way over to the bar. The bartender tonight was Yiri, a woman from Hata. She spoke impeccable n'Thilian and Hatan of course, as well as bits and bobs of other tongues, but because she was not n'Thilian, she couldn't use magical translation when she encountered someone outside her realm of languages. It was for this reason that she usually worked with an n'Thilian named Devan, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Thesinx could have used magical translation, but for the moment, she let Serilt take the lead. He patted Yari on the back and spoke in Xresian, 'need some help, friend?'

The man swung round, surprise fast turning to delight at the sight of one of his compatriots. He patted Serilt none too gently in return, 'oh my god, you are sent from on high my friend. It seems I can't order a drink.'

'Excuse my directness, but you're Yari san de Rhune, right?'

The man laughed, 'I am, though I didn't expect to be recognized at a place like this.'

'What are you drinking, Yari?'

'Whatever this lovely bartender recommends.'

Serilt held his hands up in acknowledgement. He switched to n'Thilian and turned to Yiri, 'Hi Yiri, he'll have a-'. He looked from one to the other and decided introductions were in order. 'Yiri, Yari. Yari, Yiri.'

Yari smiled but said nothing.

'He'll have whatever you recommend.'

The tall woman pursed her lips and looked Yari up and down, before going to work. She pulled out bottles and instruments, most of which Serilt had never seen before. He suggested that the three of them take a seat at the bar while Yiri tinkered.

When they had sat, Serilt introduced Thesinx who started magically translating. They traded a few formalities while Serilt adjusted to hearing both the original speaker's words and Thesinx's translation. Most people didn't struggle with this, but most people weren't bilingual, because of the ease of magical translation.

When he had more or less adjusted, Serilt asked, 'so, what are you doing on Thile?'

'Well it's a bit of a story actually. You know we have the semi-finals of the inter-universal cup against Serof coming up, right?'

'Of course.'

'So,' Yari lowered his voice and looked around, 'so the match is being hosted on Resil, and the Resilian match officials decided to mess with everyone and have the match at altitude. Somehow, Serof found out about this and so they started to train at altitude and because we have people watching them, we decided to do the same, and South Rest offered to host us.'

'Wow, that is a story. How long have you been here?'

'A week, and we'll be here one more before heading to Resil.'

Thesinix piped up, 'How is the altitude?'

'To be honest, I think I've already adjusted, but it never hurts to play it safe, especially before such a big match.'

A few minutes later, Yari's drink arrived. A series of opaque glasses of ever increasing size rested upon a thin stone slab. With the aid of Thesinix's magical translation, Yiri patiently described the procedure. Yari was to first drink half of the smallest glass, then pour the rest into the next smallest and then repeat.

Yiri went to attend to another customer while the three of them sat in silence, staring at the sprawl that was Yari's "drink".

'How much alcohol do you think is in there?'

'A lot?'

'Is this a reward or punishment?'

Yari made his way slowly through the procession of ten glasses, not all of which turned out to contain alcohol. During that time, he spoke easily with the two academics.

As he was just finishing the eighth glass, Svee, of South Rest's chemistry department, showed up and was suitably impressed with her friends' new company.

Minutes condensed into hours as they asked Yari what it was like to be an athlete, or what it was like to be constantly on tour, or what it was like to be famous. They found the big man surprisingly forthright, when he was not steadily flirting with Yiri the bartender. Eventually, the conversation found the topic of Xresian culture.

'I mean, how do you stay connected with your family if you're on the road so much?' This was from Svee who had wasted no time in catching up to what she judged to be the others' level of inebriation.

'Of course it's not easy. But it's only ever a couple of gates to get back to Xrese and besides, I make an effort to seek out Xresians wherever I go, though today I didn't have to try very hard.' He laughed and slapped Serilt on the back. Serilt noted that the strength of slaps was increasing with the level of inebriation. His mind wandered down several approaches to modeling the relationship.

Back in the moment, he realized Yari was answering another question, 'I go to *Trepa* and *Pulhe* ceremonies fairly regularly.'

Both of Serilt's colleagues turned to look at him. 'What?'

Thesinix asked, 'have you been to a *Trepa* or a *Pulhe* here?'

'No.'

Another slap on the back, 'come tomorrow! There's a *Pulhe* at the Xresian consulate.'

Serilt tried to wriggle out of what he belatedly recognized as a trap set by his friends. 'I don't know, I mean those things can get pretty acrimonious.'

Yet again, his back winced, 'come on! Thirty minutes of prattle by the elders and then an unending barbecue. I can almost taste it. The *Irinca*,' he motioned with his hand, laying out a feast piece by piece, 'with sides of *Perstilla* and *Famarella* and then dripping wet *Camcarcons* right off the grill, and then all that topped with *Iquita*, *Herdata*, and luxurious amounts of *Pacono*.' Yari's attention snapped back to Serilt, 'when's the last time you had *Camcarcons*?'

Serilt sighed, 'okay.'

'Fantastic!' This time instead of a slap, Serilt's back received a one armed embrace, 'I'll see you at three o'clock at the cafe with the green awnings in Semi-North Square, and now it's time for me to go.'

The big man rumbled off of his barstool and then made his way over to where Yiri was busy with another alcohol themed construction project.

'I guess it was time for him to go.' This was from Svee as she finished off another beer.

Serilt snorted, 'what a guy.'

'Seri's new best friend.'

He looked over at Thesinix. 'Thanks for that, by the way. There's a reason I don't go to *Pulhes* you know.'

Thesinix used her comforting-a-small-child tone, 'is our thaumatologist scared of a bit of democratic theology?'

Serilt shook his head and looked over at Yari and Yiri, who were now engaged in heated discussion. After a moment, Serilt looked back at the pair, then turned to Thesinix, and then looked once more at the two humans towering over the bar. He turned to Thesinix, 'You're still translating for them, aren't you?'

Svee grinned, 'oh, you sly little-'

'So what are they saying?'

'Is she breaking his heart? Is he breaking her heart? Are hearts being broken!'

Thesinix smiled and took a sip of water, 'I'm afraid that's personal information that I'm not comfortable sharing.'

Serilt looked at Svee and then back at the engineer, 'but *you* know it, therefore it's no longer personal.'

Svee had already given up, 'that's our Thes. Open-lipped as a piglet.'

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As the consulate came into view, Serilt saw that the crowd was spilling out onto the street. Adults gossiped and preened as children scampered about, the scene tugging at Serilt's memories. As they approached the steps to the large but modest building, shouts and exclamations rang out as people turned towards them. Yari acknowledged them, and shook hands with some of the more self confident men and women. He did not bask in the attention, however, as he directed Serilt that they should proceed inside.

The building consisted of a single room with plentiful frosted windows allowing a modest amount of light into the space. A man in a red satin vest greeted them by touching his right thumb to his right shoulder and intoning welcome.

Yari and Serilt responded in kind and moved past. There was an open space in the middle, while the rest of the room was stuffed with wooden pews, all facing the central area.

'Where do you want to sit?'

Serilt glanced over at the man and shrugged. 'Does it matter?'

Yari just smiled and guided them to a spot about halfway back on the right side. After they had settled, he started to explain in a low voice, 'I've never seen it on Xrese, but in many expat communities, people sit very rigidly according to their beliefs. Once the conversation starts up, we'll see if that's true here.'

'Huh, I didn't know that. My parents made me attend some of these when I was in the academy-'

'Were you here, at that time?'

'I wasn't at the university, the South Rest academy is slightly outside the city. It's government property so they do military testing and whatnot there.'

'Cool.'

'I guess. Anyway, my parents did live in the city at that time and they would come and fetch me for *Pulhe* every Thursday. That was probably the last time I've been to one, except for visits back to our universe, of course.'

'It may be slightly different these days.'

'Are you trying to make me feel old?'

Yari glanced over, 'No. Should I be?'

The pair laughed and Serilt noted that the benches were filling.

'Anyway, if you go to *Pulhes* wherever you go, you must be something of an expert on expat *Pulhes*.'

'Like I said, I'm here for the food.'

'Fair enough.'

A hush fell as the man in the satin vest made his way purposefully to the center. Serilt knew that this was the one scripted part of the *Pulhe*, a single moment of order. The man sat in the front row of the benches facing away from where they had entered. All eyes were now on the satin vest, awaiting the initiation.

After a minute of silence, the man stood and spoke. 'Let us take this time to discover and honor the one god.'

Several things happened at once. First, clocks hanging on each wall were started, marking the beginning of the thirty minutes of the *Pulhe*. At the same time, men and women all over the room stood. Eventually, they sat again, as they recognized that a woman opposite the man in the satin vest had been the first to stand. Indeed, she was already speaking, if not shouting, 'why do we still use this archaic language? There is not one god. There are many gods, just as there are many universes. How can we, Xresians who sit in a universe which is not Xrese, continue to believe any differently?'

'Here we go,' muttered Serilt as shouts of support and anger rang through the room.

A woman several rows in back of the vested man had been the fastest to stand, so she would speak next. The rule of order was that you could not speak if you agreed generally with the person who had spoken last. It was a system designed to produce shouting matches, at least that's how it had always seemed to Serilt.

This woman was tall and full bodied, and her voice echoed around the chamber. 'The one god created the universe of Xrese, of that we all agree. Why then, I ask, could they have not created this universe as well?'

More shouting. This time, fewer rose to meet the challenge. The quickest was a young, dark haired man with a thin mustache seated a little to the right of Yari. 'If the Xresian god

created this universe, why then did he not grant magical ability to Xresians--- his chosen people I remind you. If the one god created this universe, why would he put his people at such a disadvantage here!

A roaring response came from an older man opposite them, 'we are the one god's chosen people in the universe of Xrese, but in this universe, the one god has chosen another people. Is there something so illogical about that?'

The rebuttals were flying thick and fast, the participants no longer quite abiding by the first-person-to-stand-can-speak rule.

After a few rehashes of the arguments, a dark haired woman gained the floor. 'If, as you say, there is just one god who created all the universes, then why is magic different in every universe, and what's more, why is there no pattern between universes? Are you claiming your one god creates universes at random?'

A wave of support followed the woman back to her seat, as no one immediately contested. Finally, an old man stood. His voice quavered with the effort of projecting to fill the room. 'I read the other day that the thaumatologists do not think that the magic in each universe is random. No, they think that there is a pattern that binds all universes together.'

A young man nearby, possibly a relation, stood. 'I did not realize Sekka Ra was an expert on the science of the multiverse. You do learn so many new things at each meeting.'

The crowd laughed and hooted, and Serilt smiled to himself. That smile froze as his eyes made contact with a light haired woman sitting almost opposite them. Their eyes locked for one moment, then two. The woman broke off the contact and leaned to whisper something to her neighbor.

The neighbor then stood, even though another man was speaking. The speaking man stopped, reddened, and bowed to the other man before resuming his seat. 'Friends we do not need to take Sekka Ra's word on this subject. I have just learned that today we are joined by Serilt san de Ricole, an experimental thaumatologist of inter-universal acclaim. I propose that we hear from him next.'

Serilt blinked.

No one else stood. There was silence in the hall.

Gradually, people began to look at him, guided either by the gazes of the austere man and the attractive light haired woman, or by the fact that Yari was prodding him none too gently.

'You have to stand up.' Yari muttered.

'No way.'

'They're not going to say anything until you do. You have to get up now.'

'Someone else will-'

He was cut short as Yari stood and dragged Serilt to his feet, then sat quickly.

Serilt looked out at the upturned faces, and did his best to smile. 'Hello. I am not particularly devout myself,' unconsciously, he lay a hand across his chest, a visible reminder of who "himself" was, 'so I don't have any theological opinion, but I guess I can say with some confidence that the different magical universes are connected in a pattern, related to the strength of the various magical couplings in each universe. Thank you.'

Serilt plummeted back to his seat and received yet another prod in the ribs.

'Good job, kid.'

'I'm older than you.'



'So you keep saying.'

For a while no one spoke. Serilt wondered if he had just handed victory to the "one god" camp.

The first woman who had spoken for the "many gods" theory now rose, 'I find this information very interesting and thank Mr. san de Ricole for sharing. Now I urge you friends. Think back to the first time your parents told you about god. What did they say? They said that god made the trees and the birds and the mountains and the rivers, in fact god made everything on Xrese. Is that not true?' She paused to some nods and surveyed the room carefully, 'what if, friends, what if god is a manifestation of magic. What if our universe always existed, and then god came into being, and used magic to make the trees and the rivers. What, I ask you now, if god did not make magic, but rather magic made god?'

'Preposterous.'

'Half baked!'

The formal rebuttal came from a woman sitting next to the vested man. 'Our friend acknowledges that god made the universe, but then asserts that they themselves were created from magic? I ask, is it not true that magic is part of the universe?'

The austere man stood, 'let us ask our friend the thaumatologist once again.' He looked around. 'Agreed?'

No one dissented. This time Serilt rose under his own power, 'I don't really have a good answer for you to be honest. Magic comes from fundamental particles which are clearly inside of the universe, but then again, dimensions become tricky at such small scales. It is possible that there is a valid interpretation of magic existing "outside" of the universe.'

The woman to the right stood again. 'Well there you have it. If magic is outside of the universe, how could god have created magic?'

'That's not what he said!'

'Sit down!'

Serilt turned to Yari, 'what have I done?'

'I think this is the most exciting *Pulhe* I've been to in a while, friend.'

Serilt shook his head and tuned back into the discussion in time to hear, 'but aren't there universes with no magic? Where did the rivers and the trees come from in those universes, if as you say each of your many gods was created by magic?'

The austere man did not need to suggest it this time, everyone turned back to Serilt. He looked helplessly at Yari who gave him a subtle thumbs up. Taking a deep breath, he shot to his feet, then took a moment to compose.

'Once again, I don't have a completely satisfactory answer. There do exist universes with so little magic that the beings of those universes would not know that magic even existed. So it depends on what you mean by a universe without magic. Some have very very little magic, but they still have some. What I'm trying to say is it is impossible to have a universe with exactly zero magic.'

That lit new arguments about how much energy, time, and magic it takes to create a god, but Serilt was not called upon again. At the gonging of the clocks which announced the end of the *Pulhe* he breathed a huge sigh of relief. 'That was no fun.'

'Ah, but now it's time to eat, my friend.'

The barbeque--- hosted in a park adjacent to the consulate--- was as elaborate as Yari had described. Many people had brought side dishes while fish and vegetables had been smoking during the *Pulhe*. Now, the grills were fired up and marinated meat unloaded onto them, as a queue formed alongside some picnic tables. Yari and Serilt got in line and were handed thick paper plates. They chatted as several men and women came up to introduce themselves to the pair. At one point, Yari commented, 'I don't know who's more famous now, me or you.'

Serilt looked at him with a smirk.

'Ok, I get it. It's still me.'

As they were heaping their plates to the point of collapse, Yari gestured, 'what is that on top of the *Camcarcons*? It does not look like *Uthe*.'

'That's because it's not *Uthe*.'

'What, they don't have *Uthe* here?'

'I think they can grow it up north, but n'Thilians have not developed a taste for it, so it's still pretty hard to come by. But try it,' he added, gesturing to the dish, 'it's a kind of pickled parsnip, a bit spicy.'

By the time they got through the line, all of the seating had been taken, so they made their way to a grassy area and sat on a gentle slope overlooking the park's small lake.

For a time they attacked the food in silence. Serilt reveled in the nostalgia of flavors, and for a brief moment considered that he had made the right decision to come.

A young man approached and introduced himself to them. Then he looked at Yari, 'I usually take a walk after eating, care to join me?'

Yari's plate was still half full, but he did not immediately refuse. Serilt looked up at the man, then down at Yari, then up again.

*Oh. Ohhh.*

Suddenly Yari popped up, 'yeah, I also just finished actually. Serilt can you throw out my plate when you're done?'

'I would love to.'

The sarcasm was lost in the thin air. Yari was already underway, the two men chatting as they walked towards the lake. Like clockwork, the light haired woman from the *Pulhe* sat down on Serilt's other side. 'There he goes. Care for some company?'

'I suppose that is the least you owe me after outing me earlier.'

'Was that bad of me?'

Serilt sighed, 'perhaps. I'm Serilt by the way.'

'Umm, I know.'

'I know you know, but I was hoping you would introduce yourself in return.'

The woman reddened slightly, 'sorry, I'm Qure san Prols, I'm an admin in the math department at the uni.'

He looked at her again, 'nice to meet you Qure, or have we met before?'

'No, actually I'm friends with Contia and she mentioned a physicist with a Xresian sounding name so I looked you up.'

'Contia...'

'She's a technical mage in the computing department.'

'Oh, yes, I know who you're talking about.'

'I would hope so. She said you were cute.'

It was Serilt's turn to redden. Before he could think of something to say, Qure stood.

'Come and eat with my family. I promise there will be minimal theology.'

'Well when you put it that way, Qure san Prols, how could I say no?'